# casual connect



CASUAL GAMES ASSOCIATION

Winter 2014




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# Letter from the Director



Amsterdam was amazing. If you were not in attendance at Casual Connect Europe this year, I'm sorry you missed out. With parties like one could only have in Amsterdam, fantastic lectures and lots and lots of business and meetings happening over three full days, it was magical.

But what made this year completely unique is that Casual Connect was completely transformed by Indie Prize, creating an amazing mix of business and creativity inside the historic Beurs van Berlage.

Since the conference, I have been thinking there might be some lessons to learn from this transformation. What is it about Indie Prize that is so special? With this in mind, over the next 3 months, I am going to try an experiment. I am going to become a little more "Indie" and see if I can transform myself to become more focused, more passionate and less afraid to try new things.

It is all too easy to forget how lucky we are to be in the games industry. In such a fast-paced industry, we never know which idea will take us to the next level or when our break-away hit will emerge.

Jessica

Jessica Tams, *Director of the Casual Games Association*
***jessica@casualconnect.org***

## EVENT CALENDAR

**11-13 February 2014**
**Casual Connect Europe**

BEURS VAN BERLAGE
Damrak 243
1012 ZJ
Amsterdam, Netherlands



**20-22 May 2014**
**Casual Connect Asia**

Shangri-La Hotel
22 Orange Grove Road
258350, Singapore



**22-24 July 2014**
**Casual Connect San Francisco**

Hilton San Francisco
Union Square
333 O'Farrell St.,
San Francisco, CA 94102



**October 2014**
**Casual Connect Kyiv**

RUS Hotel
4 Hospitalna St.
Kyiv, 01601
Ukraine



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Derrick, CEO of FlowPlay and *Vegas World,* has been a games and online entertainment executive for almost 20 years. During his career, he has led the development of over 200 digital entertainment projects. Most recently he was General Manager of Mobile Games for RealNetworks, a business unit he founded.
**Seattle, WA**



**Chris Powell**
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Chris brings the knowledge of multiple design disciplines to the social mobile space. He aims to make social games that are a place for a community of users to meet and share an experience.
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**Imaginary Games**
**Vancouver, BC**



**Lea Gulino**
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Lea is a voice actor who has recorded for 2K, Maxis, Sega, Activision, Telltale, Kixeye, Riot and many others. She is a graduate of New York University and the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts. Lea records aboard her large wooden Chris Craft Cabin Cruiser docked in Sausalito, CA. She is also an expert varnisher.
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Juan, Founder and Studio Manager at Joju Games, is Advisor for the Free2Play Design and Business Summit at GDC, judge for the "Sense of Wonder Night" Game Festival at Tokyo Game Show and an Editor of the IGDA Casual Games White Paper.
**Berkeley, CA**

**Casual Connect Europe**
**Amsterdam**
***February 2014***

**Abbey Games**
**Utrecht, Netherlands**

**Vlambeer**
**Utrecht, Netherlands**

**Casual Connect SF**
**San Francisco**
***July 2014***

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Anita McLaughlin has been working in digital Media as a professional game artist and art director for over fifteen years for Disney, TDK Mediactive, Sound Source Interactive and others. She has taught 3D animation and modeling.
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**Rob Leach**
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Rob is an 11-year industry veteran who has touched everything from interactive installations on cruise ships to educational titles for handhelds. When he's not working on games, he's writing or publishing short-form fiction on stanleythewhale.com.
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Jordan is a Blogger and Social Media Consultant at Crawford Communications. He has worked in IT, Sales, and is the former Editor of The Tech Throwdown. He currently writes for Plantronics Smarter Working and Game Over blogs.
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# About the Cover



**Elaine Heney**
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Elaine is CEO of Chocolate Lab Apps and author of the *App Escape Plan.* She has helped publish over 200 apps while generating more than three million downloads. In 2013 she launched the Mobile App University at www.mobileappcourses.com
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**Maksim Maksimov**
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Maksim is managing partner of RJ Games company. He has more than seven years of experience in online game development. Highly skilled in all stages of game development—from idea to marketing promotional—Maksim has directed and managed such social games as *Under Siege, Under Fire* and *Crisis.*
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**Toca Boca**
**Stockholm, Sweden office**

**Casual Connect Kyiv**
**Kyiv**
***October 2014***

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**Casual Connect Asia**
**Singapore**
***May 2014***



**Elin Jonsson**

Elin Jonsson's paintings are inspired by a mix of pop surrealism, art nouveau, and classic fairy tales. She began her career as an illustrator for Peace & Love, the largest music festival in Sweden, where she explored her love for a vintage circus aesthetic and all things French.

After moving to Vancouver in 2012, Jonsson became cofounder of Imaginary Games. She has played an integral role in the development of *Afterland*, a soon-to-be-released "mobile collectible card game" that tells the stories of magical characters traveling across the space between life and death.

ON THE COVER: *When the* Afterland *caravan arrives in a new location, Alva opens her locket to let the spirits know she is looking for her lost love.*

NEW COLUMN!

Infographic

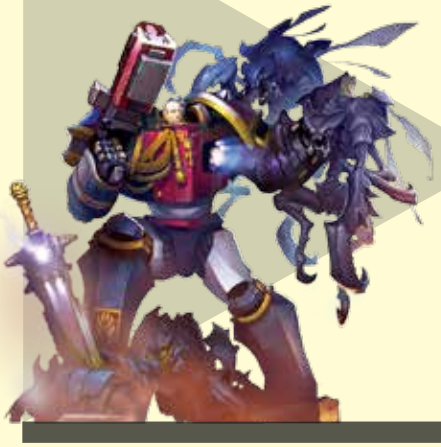
# F2P: The Way to a Perfect Tutorial

## Global and Detailed View of Tutorial Development Steps

**BASIC PURPOSE OF TUTORIAL IS TO GENERATE PLAYER'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE GAME**

**Loading screen**

› art fully describes game concept



**battle mode**

› minimum clicks

› plenty of VFX

› action-driven game mechanics



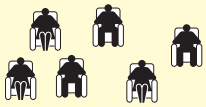
**Main Gameplay**

**city**

› strictly plotline learning mode

› all core gameplay has to be shown



***Target audience only***



**DETAILED VIEW OF TUTORIAL DEVELOPEMENT** (case study: social game *Under Fire!*)

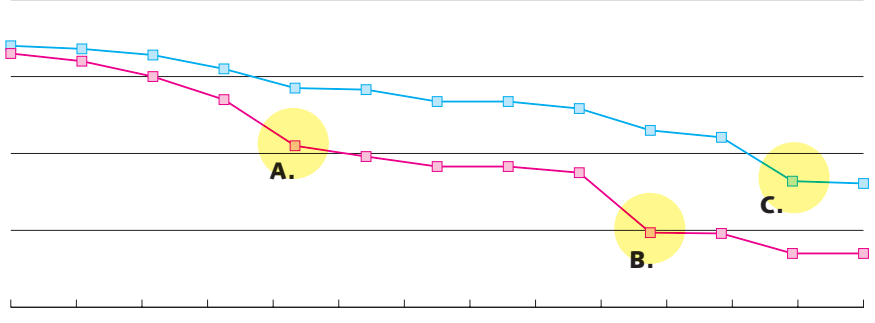
**A.** **PROBLEM:** Tutorial targets were unclear to players: lack of motivation and interest.
**SOLUTION:** Increase user involvement in battle mode via visual engagement.
**RESULT:** +7.4% of users remained in the first battle mode.

**B.** **PROBLEM:** Unfinished first battle session.
**SOLUTION:** Increase user engagement in battle strategy by adding interactive elements.
**RESULT:** +4.6% of users started first quest-line in the city.

**C.** **NEW PROBLEM**: Declining amount of users finish the final step of game tutorial.

tutorial v1.0
tutorial v1.1

**Tutorial v1.0 comparison with Tutorial v1.1**



Maksim Maksimov;
*Managing Partner, RG Games;*
**Moscow, Russia**

## All data is based on social online games developed by RJ Games:

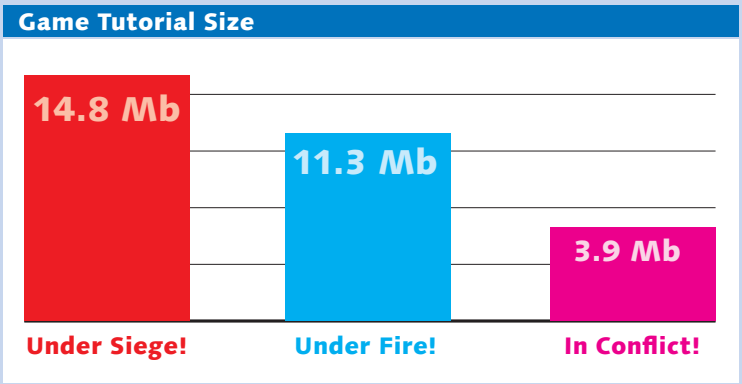
**Under Siege!**

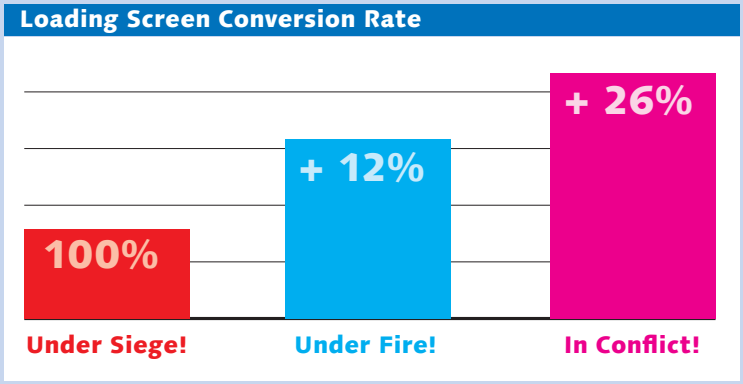
**Under Fire!**

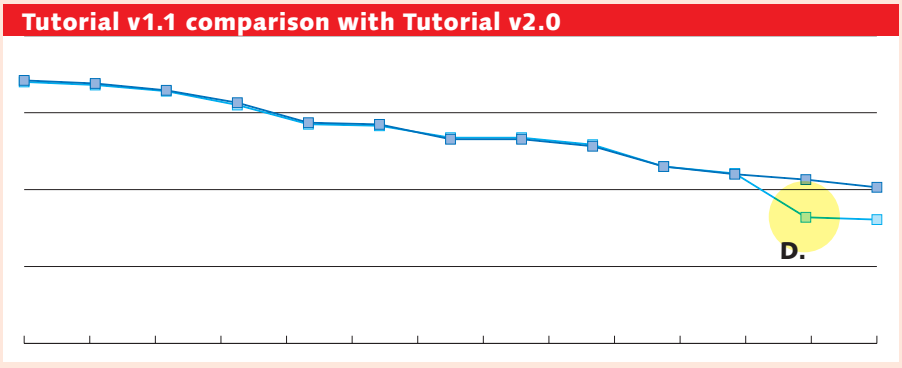
**In Conflict!***

*soon to be released on Facebook

### THE MAIN GOAL IS TO DECREASE INITIAL LOADING SIZE




**D. PROBLEM:** Some users don't click fullscreen button.
**SOLUTION:** Switch fullscreen button placement to the center of the screen.
**RESULT:** +4.9% of users finished the tutorial.

# A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

## *Afterland*

**GENRE**
**Collectible Card Game**
**PLATFORM**
**iOS, Android**
**RELEASE DATE**
**Spring, 2014**

In the macabre, traveling carnival of *Afterland,* lost souls compete for fame while wandering the nebulous space between life and death. The studio behind this otherworldly creation is Imaginary Games, founded by Chris Powell and Elin Jonsson.

The complex characters and hand-painted art of *Afterland* evoke solemn themes rarely found in the capricious world of mobile gaming—but it's community-building and a passion for emotional game-play that seem to drive the jaunty success of Imaginary Games.



by Chris Powell;
*Designer, Imaginary Games;*
**Vancouver, BC**

## Inspiration

Originally inspired by the Mexican holiday, Day of the Dead or *Dia de los Muertos,* the *Afterland* universe draws on a deep pool of mischievous dark humor and sardonic archetypes.

The transitional space of the afterlife offered a rich terrain to construct an ever-changing landscape of characters. After we established our bizarre setting, we started to wonder what kinds of characters could survive its perils.

The idea of a world populated by traveling misfits and lost souls really started to gel when we imagined how certain outcasts might band together to find solace and a sense of belonging on their uncertain journey.



# *Afterland*

## Incarnations

*Afterland* went through a variety of core mechanic and visual iterations before it hit its stride. At first, we borrowed the cartoony style of our previous game, *Swing the Bat,* and implemented a three-on-three battle mechanic similar to the asynchronous social play of *Kingdoms at War* (A Thinking Ape). The original iteration also featured a floating head named Madame Death, who chaperoned players through the afterlife.

Facebook analytics gave us insight into who was attracted to the art we were making, and that quickly became the base for our next iteration.




When we learned that our interested audience was over 60% female, we decided to develop a harvesting concept that didn't focus around battle. Players would continue a "run" of cards with symbols and suits, creating patterns as in traditional card games like gin rummy and poker. But after some play tests, we realized it's difficult to teach players a "new" game, even if it uses familiar mechanics from traditional card games. We also started to miss the competitive play from our earlier iteration.





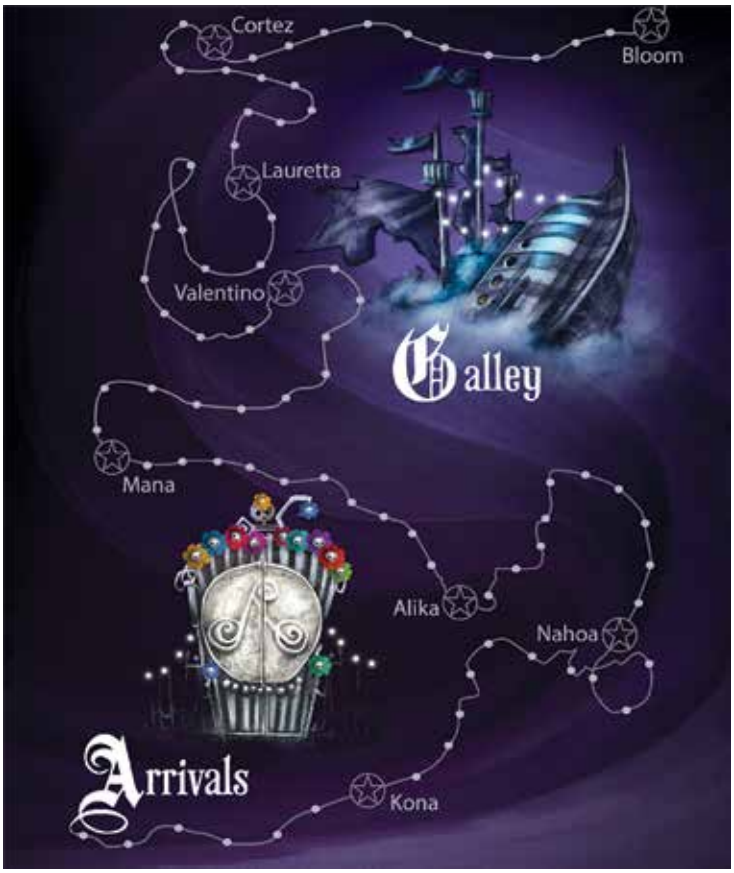
A turning point in our design process came when we realized competitive card play could appeal to a broad audience that includes female players. We applied some key changes to the mechanics of a traditional Japanese collectible card game:

Cards choices became reactionary—instead of playing the traditional throw down, players responded to their opponent's card.

More chance elements were added, like an energy-stacking mechanic that enabled easy bluffing.

The battle/war metaphor was replaced by magical performers competing to win more fame than their rivals.






**Narrative**

On the *Afterland* map, players travel from one region to the next, collecting rewards for their magical performances. Each location is home to a family of cards with a unique verse to give insight into the family's origins and abilities. We also included these stories in the *Afterland* book that was sent out to the generous players who contributed to our Kickstarter campaign.




**Look-and-Feel**

After experimenting with different styles, we finalized an in-game look-and-feel that combined both vector and raster imagery to complement our hand-painted art. We aimed for a tactile look using texture and lighting to show visual changes in movable objects that players can tap, touch, drag and drop.

We intentionally used a limited color palette throughout the game—colors are often de-saturated when the cards are on screen, for example—so nothing upstages the rich artwork.

Our graphic look-and-feel became significantly more coherent when we wrote down three words—

**Circus Gothic Whimsy**

—and taped them to the wall in our office. If an in-game graphic didn't visualize at least two of the three words, it was scrapped or revisited.



**Crossing Over**

Making things by hand has always been part of Elin's vision for *Afterland.* Art prints, original paintings and heirloom lockets have already sold in several boutique stores, as well as on Etsy and on Fab.com.

In time, our goal is to connect mobile game-play with different types of handcrafted merchandise. For example, in upcoming live events, we may reward high-ranking players by mailing them art prints of the rare cards they achieve.

# *Afterland*







## Self-Expression

Elin painted this card set that depicts women who are beautiful, sensual and *dangerous.* For reference, she turned to a Swedish folktale that tells the story of Skogsrå, a beautiful feminine creature who lures men into the forest only to kill them after copulation. With Elin's paintings as our starting point, we created the "Widower," a card set of women who reside in *Afterland's* Tea House. The sinister metaphor was extended to game-play elements too—the family's special ability is *poison.*

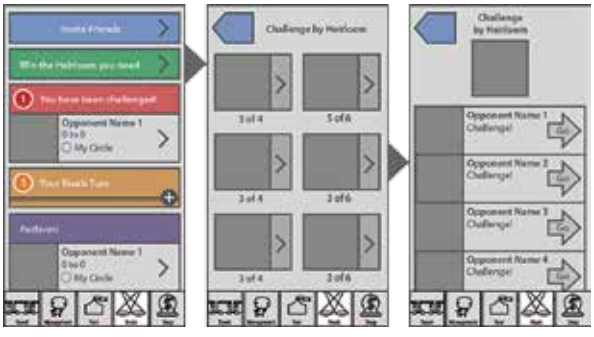
## Design

When we needed a narrative to wrap over a card-stealing mechanic, we found a suitable metaphor in the *sandman,* the infamous dream thief who visits his victims in slumber. In *Afterland,* our sandmen are mysterious figures whose very bodies—composed of stolen dreams—are held together by canvas cloaks. Painting human features on the stitched canvas likened the sandmen to performing clowns, and placed them nicely into *Afterland's* carnivalesque world.

## Mentors

Since the beginning of *Afterland,* mentors have been instrumental in growing our understanding of mobile game design. While we've never met Raph Koster, his notion of providing players with the emotional experiences they *want* to feel is instrumental in various aspects of our game. Emotional game-play is a highly effective tool in any entertainment medium; it may also be the most elusive. Bill Fulton, former psychology consultant for Microsoft Games, helped us understand our alternative mainstream "goth" audience. More importantly, he helped us consider what our players want to feel, as individuals and as a group. Turning information like this into actionable design items is what our studio is striving to achieve in the coming years.

The game design was created and iterated on as a series of grey-box diagrams. The image shows a lobby with heirloom player matching.



## Community

In 2012, at the Casual Connect conference in Seattle, Elin and I met with Patrick Minotti and Flurry publishing. After explaining our idea for *Afterland,* we learned the scope of our project was large, and development time would be long, but there was one thing we could do immediately to increase our chances of success. Patrick told us to focus every bit of our energy on building strong communities. We focused on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, you name it; and we reached out beyond digital media to welcome a community of passionate players. The journey has been long, with more obstacles than we could have anticipated, yet because we continue to nurture our spirited community, *Afterland* continues to grow.

At the Indie Prize Showcase in 2013, Elin was recognized for her artistic passion and dedication to building the *Afterland* community.






## Conclusion

Afterland has given us a platform for creative expression and helped us hone our understanding of mobile game design. Along the way we've found inspiration in a variety of diverse places and reached out beyond the existing gaming world to seek a community for Afterland. Understanding our audience and building a game that speaks to them has been, and will continue to be, a priority for Imaginary Games. A key to our growth and longevity as a company has come as a result of gracious mentoring from some wise and talented people in the industry. We thank everyone who has helped us on our journey, and look forward to seeing all of you in our gothic daydream. ❊

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by Laura Shigihara;
*Independent Developer;*
**San Mateo, CA**

# Laura Shigihara on *Rakuen* and Music in Video Games



Laura Shigihara

*Rakuen*




**Laura Shigihara is a video game industry** veteran who has composed music and created audio for over 25 published games. After working for free on the casual game *Wobbly Bobbly,* Shigihara was quickly offered paying jobs and soon found herself working on games such as *To the Moon, Surviving High School,* and *World of Warcraft* (in which she provided the vocals for the Singing Sunflower). She was also the lead composer and sound designer for *Plants vs. Zombies.* Recently, Shigihara has begun expanding her talents to become a game developer of a game titled *Rakuen.*

## The Opening Act—The Beginning of Shigihara's Interest in Music and Video Games

"I'm sure it probably had something to do with my parents," Shigihara says when asked where her passion for music came from. Her father always loved classical music and though he "didn't have the means to take music lessons, he always had a great ear for it." Meanwhile, her mother was a master of musical improv. "When my sisters and I were misbehaving," Shigihara explains, "she might mutter to herself, 'these kids are driving me up the wall!' Next thing you know, she was singing a whole song about how we were driving her crazy." From an early age, Shigihara felt such an attraction to music that she began taking piano lessons at the age of five. She would later learn to play the drums and guitar as well.

While growing up, Shigihara enjoyed playing a wide range of video games, including *Chrono Trigger, Starcraft, Mega Man 5, Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island,* and *The Legend of Zelda: Link to the Past.* A favorite pastime during these early years was learning to play video game music by ear. "I could listen to it over and over," she says, "especially the music from the original *Mega Man* series. I was especially drawn to video game music because to me, it was both catchy and complex."

## Musical and Digital Arrangements—Becoming a Professional Musician

While studying International Relations and Business at UC Berkeley, Shigihara created music for fun, but she didn't seriously consider a career as a musician. However, two events occurred that convinced Shigihara she could make a living from music production. "The first one came during college after I had given a CD with some of my original music on it to a friend in Japan; she submitted it to a bunch of record labels without telling me." Soon her parents were fielding calls from Japanese record labels offering auditions. "I came from an area that was very rigid about 'acceptable' careers, so being able to do music as more than just a hobby was really a dream come true."

Sometime later, Shigihara learned that Tik Games was creating a game called *Wobbly Bobbly.* "The company really had no need for an external composer," she says, "I actually offered to do the job for free because I was so enthusiastic about composing for a game." She also used this as an opportunity to show she understood the importance of meeting the deadlines of their production schedule. "After completing the soundtrack, the CEO told me that he really liked my music," Shigihara says. "From then on out, they paid me to do several subsequent projects with them."

# Laura Shigihara on *Rakuen*

*Wobbly Bobbly* provided more than just an opportunity to display her talent and professionalism. "One of the difficulties was just making sure the file size didn't get too large," she says. It was a challenge that made her further respect the work done by video game composers in the NES era. "They had so little to work with in terms of file size and sample quality, and they still created tracks that I loved. My limitations were nothing compared to theirs of course, so it just made me appreciate their work more."

### From Dissonance to Harmony—Adapting to Different Game Demands

A challenge that Shigihara and others in the video game industry face is adapting their style to the numerous demands made by differing game designs and game studios. "I really like creating melodic music, but sometimes, if it's not done correctly, it can interfere with the game-play," she says. As a result, many producers seem to favor ambient tracks even though they aren't memorable, perhaps because they seem to be a safer musical choice. Shigihara doesn't believe you have to make that trade-off. Her goal is to "compose music with strong melodies that doesn't interfere with the game-play."

Shigihara's standard approach for each game is to create an overarching melody with more complex arrangements underneath. "I use a lot of counterpoint melodies, [and] I add reverb to my tracks manually," she says. She accomplishes this "by entering the notes and lowering the velocities, changing up the distance between notes so it's not always the same."

Still, studio demands continue to have an impact on her creativity. She was able to record her voiceover tracks for *World of Warcraft* from her home studio. In contrast, she says, "when working with other large companies… there were often several people involved with making decisions. There were also a lot of pre-established rules and guidelines about how many passes needed to be done and who needed to check off on each one. While I think there are definitely some cases (especially with large games) where this is necessary, the downside is that it can greatly dilute the creativity of the music."

### *Rakuen*—Composing a Story-Based Adventure with Puzzles and Mysteries

After the Tohoku Earthquake, the 2011 natural disaster that caused a tsunami which damaged the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and caused widespread harm to Japan, Akira Yamaoka (the video game sound composer for games like *Silent Hill*) organized a benefit album to raise money for the victims of the tragedy. When Shigihara was asked if she could contribute a song for this cause, she decided to finish a song called "Jump" which she had written years prior.

At its core, "Jump" is a song about hope. "I thought about how in life, we often have to go forward and hope for the best," she says, "even though we don't know how things will turn out. Whether it's a new job, a new relationship, an illness—we don't know if we're gonna sink or swim; we don't know if we'll fly or fall. Sometimes we can't do anything at all, but hope for the best, and jump." She adds: "We all have a child inside of us that just wants to be told that everything is going to be all right. Sometimes when your Mom says, 'Don't worry, everything's gonna be all right,' she can't explain how or why it will be—but just hearing it makes you feel better."

These led her to begin thinking about *Rakuen*.

The feelings that "Jump" inspired in Shigihara led her to imagine "a little boy living in the hospital, coming to terms with his problems by helping others… who are perhaps too old to have a mom, or who are carrying too much on their shoulders to ask someone to be there for them." To help these others "the boy's mom gives him the gift of hope, and through his adventures, he's able to pass that hope on to those around him." *Rakuen* centers on the how the boy lets others know, through his actions, that everything is going to be all right "so that they don't have to be afraid to jump."

Shigihara describes the game-play of *Rakuen* as a cross between *Maniac Mansion, To the Moon,* and *The Legend of Zelda: Link to the Past*—a story-based adventure game that, instead of battles, has the player solve puzzles and mysteries. The game follows the boy as he attempts to go on a quest similar to the one in his favorite storybook. While undertaking his journey, the boy begins to learn more about the other patients and their pains, and decides to help them as much as he can.



"We all have a child inside of us that just wants to be told that everything is going to be all right. Sometimes when your Mom says, 'Don't worry, everything's gonna be all right,' she can't explain how or why it will be—but just hearing it makes you feel better."

*Rakuen* places a large emphasis on building relationships with other patients in the hospital. "Even the 'dungeons' are built around each patient's story," says Shigihara. "As you

solve puzzles and figure out how to escape from rooms, you're also uncovering mysteries about each patient's life and empathizing with their struggles." As the boy solves these puzzles and mysteries, he helps the patients overcome their inner demons in unconventional ways while building an empathic connection with them.

Shigihara's says that *Rakuen* was heavily influenced by Japanese mythology and children's stories. A specific source that Shigihara drew from was the film *Spirited Away.* Says Shigihara: "I really loved how the main character didn't just *visit* this other world, she basically became a part of it. She had to get a job, work alongside and befriend strange new creatures, and learn the rules of the land." What's more, "the lines between reality and fantasy were completely blurred to the point that I was convinced this new reality was permanent."

*Rakuen* was also inspired by a movie from the other side of the world, the Italian film *Life is Beautiful.* The primary aspect of the film that inspired Shigihara was the father/son relationship. "That father was so positive and full of love," she says. "Despite all the horrible things going on around them, he still managed to protect his son by creating this whimsical world for his child." This parent/child bond motivated Shigihara to focus on what she describes as "that 'magical' ability a parent or caretaker has to create a safe space for their child, I believe this is especially important during difficult times."

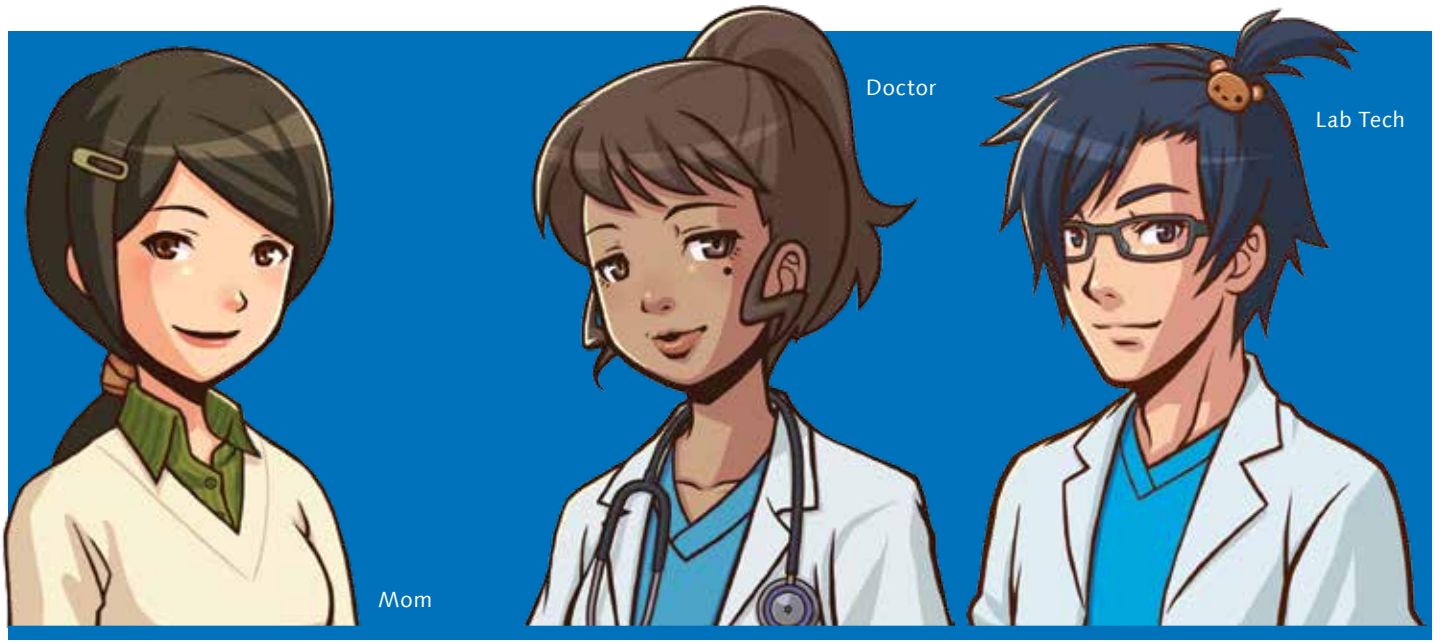
Shigihara calls *Rakuen* "a very personal project," full of characters and events drawn from her own relationships and experiences. This closeness to the material not only increased her passion for the project, it made her want "to maintain creative control over the game so that the story and characters wouldn't get diluted." This desire to maintain her vision of the game ultimately motivated her to develop it as an indie game.

### Going Indie—Designing Games Outside of an Established Studio

The scope of *Rakuen* is such that Shigihara didn't need a large studio to complete the project. Her primary collaborator is Emmy Toyonaga, a character artist with years of experience with Electronic Arts. Even so, Shigihara doesn't feel that working on this game is significantly different from working for EA, PopCap, or other established studios. "I spent a lot of my career as a contractor," she says, "so there are definitely some similar work responsibilities."

*Rakuen's* development has also benefited from the fact that Shigihara is more than just a sound designer. While her main source of income has been from composing game music, she has worked on other aspects of game development in her free time. "One of the most refreshing aspects of game development," she says, "is the idea that you get to do so many different kinds of things: art, music, writing stories, programming, designing puzzles, etc." Her passion for the medium drove her to spend years learning about all these other aspects of game development. "I think because I was always interested in video games," Shigihara says, "I spent a lot of effort over the years learning about things I felt might contribute to being able to make a game. I learned how to program (both on my own and by taking computer science classes in college), I followed pixel art tuto-

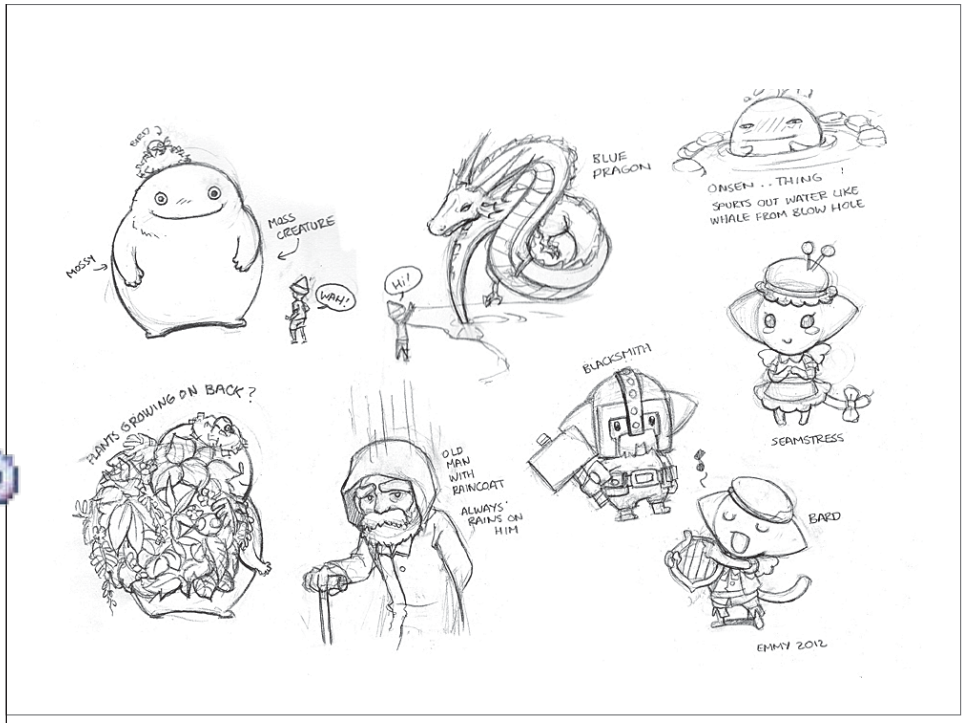
> "I was especially drawn to video game music because to me, it was both catchy as well as complex."



# Laura Shigihara on *Rakuen*



© Rakuen 2013, Laura Shigihara




Shigihara describes the game-play of *Rakuen* as a cross between *Maniac Mansion, To the Moon,* and *The Legend of Zelda: Link to the Past*—a story-based adventure game that, instead of battles, has the player solve puzzles and mysteries.

rials, [and] I composed 'alternate' level music for games that I liked." To better understand the nature of game mechanics, she also created ice breaker/party games, mainly as "variations on *Mafia,* murder mysteries, [and] treasure hunts."

It seems that Shigihara has spent many years preparing to go indie, and *Rakuen* has finally given her the opportunity to be part of every aspect of a game's development.

### Lessons, Insights, and Aspirations

Looking back at how the industry has changed during over the course of her career, Shigihara cites "the resurgence of small development teams making well-known and successful games. Because of indie-friendly platforms like Steam (and the distribution capabilities of the Internet in general), there are now many one- and two-person indie dev studios that have released games that are just as popular as mainstream titles." A benefit Shigihara sees in this shift is that smaller studios have a lot more freedom which she believes has led to "some very unique and creative games." This explosion in the number of smaller studios also provides people interested in getting into the gaming industry more opportunities to enter. Her advice to those interested in taking advantage of this trend: "Do as many projects as you can when you're first starting out (both for practice, and also to have material to put in your portfolio)."

If a person is finding work difficult to come by, Shigihara recommends that people join online communities dedicated to game development. Additionally, she suggests that those unable to find paying work should look into projects like mods, contests, and other community activities. In Shigihara's opinion, "the more good work you do, the more folks will refer you via word-of-mouth (which is actually how many game composers get the majority of their contracts)."

Shigihara suggests that aspiring video game music creators follow her lead by recreating their favorite music pieces and striving to "get as close to the original as you can." Creating alternate music for existing games is also excellent practice. Most importantly, people interested in composing music for any medium need to find any opportunity they can to practice music development that can be used to match differing types of game-play.

For now, Shigihara is focused on finishing *Rakuen* and bringing it to market. After this is completed, she hopes to make a Leeble plushy. And although she does have other games she'd like to develop, Shigihara plans on spending more time working on music. "I have a lot of songs I've written over the past year that I'd like to arrange and record," she says, "and I'm hoping to release a new album once those are finished." In the meantime however, Shigihara plans on relaxing by making videos for her YouTube channel and playing *Ni no Kuni.* ❄



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Exclusive Interview

# Make Better Games, Not Bigger Games

## An Interview with **Rami Ismail** of Vlambeer

**Rami Ismail is the Chief Executive Business & Development Guy of Vlambeer. A** drinker of cane sugar Coca-Cola exclusively, Ismail co-founded Vlambeer with Jan Willem Nijman in 2010 after they dropped out of a game design university. Their first project was to fully develop a Nijman prototype that he called *Crates from Hell.* Realizing that they needed money in order to get their studio off the ground, they created *Radical Fishing* and released it in 2010.

Since then, Vlambeer has gone on to release *Crates from Hell* under the new title of *Super Crate Box,* and other games like *GUN GODZ, LUFTRAUSERS,* and *Nuclear Throne.* Moreover, Vlambeer has found itself square in the middle of the debates over game cloning.

Casual Connect recently had the opportunity to talk to Rami about his background, Vlambeer's founding, the company's growing pains, and long-term plans.

Q&A

**When did you realize that you wanted to make games for a living? Were there any games that you played growing up that inspired your passion for this field?**

**RAMI ISMAIL:** When I was six, we got our first computer. It was an MS-DOS-based computer with QBASIC, and there was a game called *GORILLAS.* To play the game, you'd load the code and run it. Six-year old me was curious and found the main menu strings, changed one of the lines and suddenly my name was in the game. From that moment on, I was obsessed with the idea that typing words can change software.

**Given how competitive the global economy is, what are some of the reasons you and Jan Willem Nijman decided to drop out of university?**

**RI:** It wasn't for us. We'd both been making games for a while and already had a sense of direction of our own. Our university was contradictory to that, funneling people into already existing directions. We didn't really care about the economy—we just had faith that, with some work and love, *Crates From Hell* could be as successful as *Super Crate Box* ended up being.

**You and Nijman decided to build Vlambeer in Utrecht. What was it about the city that appealed to the two of you? Did the city or Netherlands offer any financial incentives for game developers?**

**RI:** There were no financial incentives, but there was a community incentive. Utrecht is the home of the Dutch Game Garden, a business center and incubator that has had a tremendous impact on the Dutch development scene. Over 40 gaming-related companies in one building would give us the creative environment and the experience nearby to try and avoid making really dumb mistakes

**One of the first games that Vlambeer made was *Radical Fishing.* What was the inspiration for this game?**

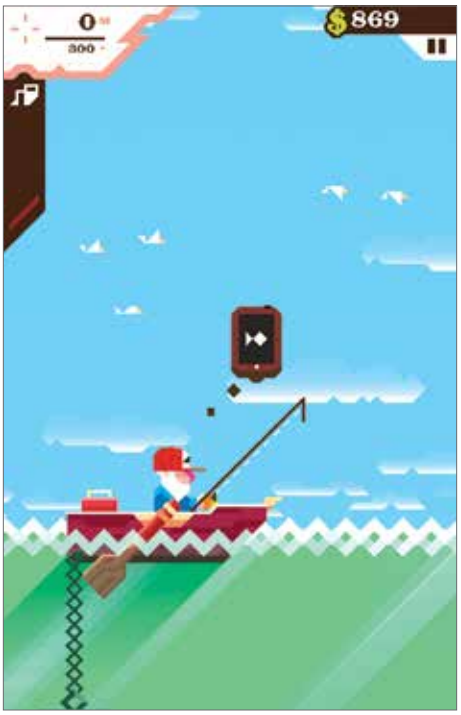
**RI:** It was a documentary about tuna overfishing with a beautiful, slow-motion shot of a fish being flung into the air. That and *Duck Hunt.*

**Years later Vlambeer decided to bring *Radical Fishing* to the iOS market but found that the game had been cloned. Since then, the cloning of indie games has been known as being *Vlambeer'd.* What advice would you give to other studios and game developers?**

*Rami Ismail*






*Ridiculous Fishing*




**RI:** We learned of the clone through Twitter, and it was a devastating experience that has been widely documented. This industry needs more creativity and less template-based game development. The best defense we've found is to work on your ideas as openly as you're comfortable with, making sure you "own" the idea in the public eye.

**On this topic, do you feel that new laws need to be developed to prevent this type of practice?**

**RI:** No. Please, no. We had a shot at suing the cloners, but we refused to in order to avoid setting a precedent in which game ideas are protected. We're against cloning, but we don't want to stifle innovation through iteration, which is what laws would end up doing in the hands of larger companies. Look no further than the phone hardware market to see the effect those sorts of laws have.

**You decided to go ahead and port *Radical Fishing* to iOS and Android devices under the name, *Ridiculous Fishing,* and it has been well received. CNN even included *Ridiculous Fishing* on its list of 25 apps that everyone should have. What are your thoughts on the positive press and reception this game has received?**

**RI:** It's a bit overwhelming! We've won both the Apple Design Award and the Apple Game Of The Year. We're nominated for a Press Academy Satellite Award, and we got nominated for a Game Developers Choice Award. We really don't know what to say, but it's really reassuring that we were able to send such a strong signal to the developer community that creativity did win in the end.

**On Vlambeer's homepage, it says that "compared to the smooth launch of iOS, a launch on Android is more like a global hardware test. You can only test on so many devices, and suddenly launching the game onto 3500+ highly fragmented pieces of hardware simply means you can't deliver a problem-free launch." What are some steps a developer can take to avoid these problems? Additionally, do you think Android hardware producers can do more to alleviate these difficulties?**

# Rami Ismail of Vlambeer



**RI:** I don't think that's possible. With the variety of devices Android offers, there are always going to be edge cases and problems that just don't occur on the test devices. Instead of avoiding those problems, I'd recommend developers to prepare for those. Anything hardware developers could do would go directly against Android's core goals, so I guess this is just the way things are. That's not bad, it's just something different than iOS offers.

**What are some of the defining characteristics of a Vlambeer game?**

**RI:** We take a small idea, something you can explain in one sentence, and polish it until we can't polish any further.

**Small studios tend to focus on a single game at a time. Yet Vlambeer seems to always have a few games in development at the same time. How did this behavior come about? Has the studio developed a process to make sure each project still meets its deadlines?**

**RI:** We get bored with one project, and we don't really do deadlines. A project gets whatever time it needs.

**What are some aspects of the business you wish someone would have told you about sooner?**

**RI:** I think my favorite thing is that I had to learn most of this myself. I was never a business guy—I was a programmer who happened to be better at business stuff than the other half of the company. So I approached it like a programming problem, trying to find efficient solutions for problems and optimizing things. Without any preconceived notions, that gave Vlambeer a fresh business approach to making games. There's nothing really like learning from your own mistakes.

**In your spare time, you created *presskit()*, a software tool that allows people to easily create well-designed pages that contain all the information people would want to know about a designer. What was the origin for this idea?**

**RI:** I honestly made it for myself and was later convinced by *Octodad* developer Phil Tibitoski to rewrite all of it so that they could use it, too. I started contacting press and developers figuring out what they needed and searched for a perfect balance between usability for the developers and readability for the press. It seems it worked out pretty well.




*GUN GODZ*

**What are your long-term goals for Vlambeer? In addition to games in development that you can work on, are there any plans for adapting your properties to other media?**

**RI:** That's one of the things that I like about Vlambeer: We don't really do long-term plans. We had three goals when we started:

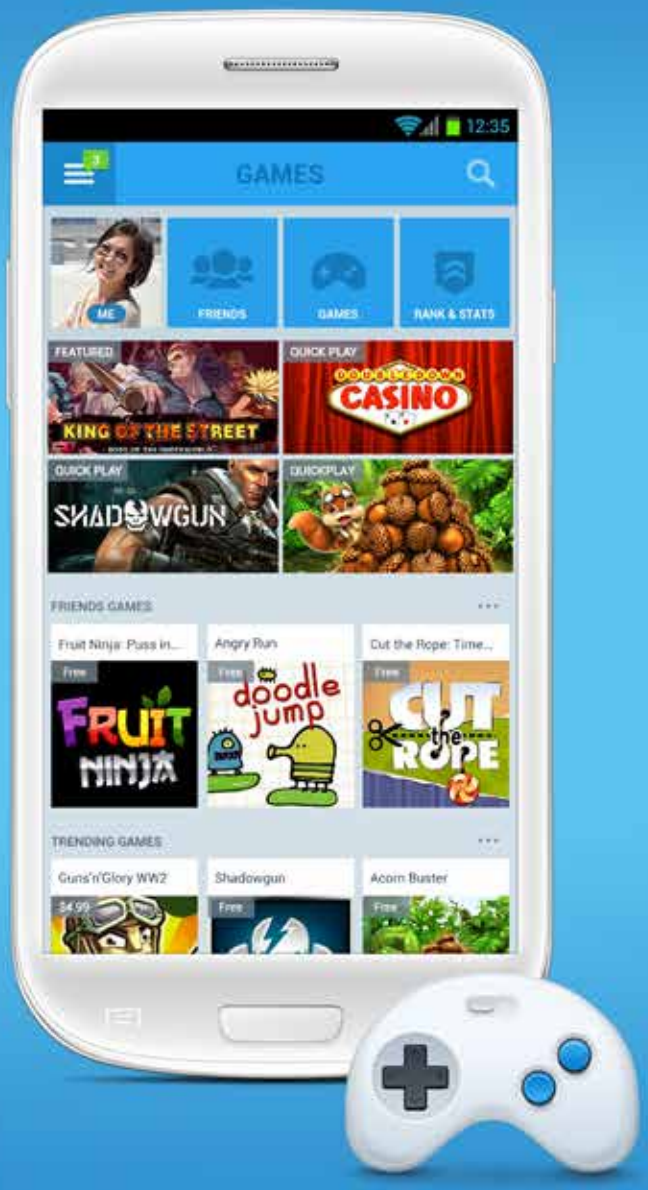
1. Make better games, not bigger games.
2. Create a path towards all digital distribution platforms.
3. Help establish and nourish the indie scene in the Netherlands.

As we grew, the first goal stayed the way it is and the third one evolved into:

3. Try to help indies everywhere, and help establish emerging territories.

That's why I travel so much. And seeing things slowly but certainly improve worldwide is quite a rewarding experience. ❊

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Studio Spotlight

# Toca Boca

**STUDIO:** Toca Boca (a subsidiary of Bonnier Group)
**FOUNDERS:** Emil Ovemar & Bjorn Jeffery
**APPS:** 22
**OFFICES:** Stockholm & San Francisco
**EMPLOYEES:** 28





**It is sometimes difficult to remember a time** when tablet computing wasn't the norm, but in 2010, the iPad was still a new device that consumers and digital product developers were only just beginning to understand. During this period, Emil Ovemar was on paternity leave and couldn't help noticing that his children played with the new devices as if they were toys. As it happened, Ovemar and his friend Björn Jeffery were already at work developing new products for the iPad, so it was only natural that they began to discuss ways of adapting these touch-screen devices for use by small children.

## And So It Begins

At this time, both Ovemar and Jeffery worked in Research and Development for the Bonnier Group (a family-owned multinational media corporation), which had begun an internal initiative called Bonnier Digital. According to Jeffery, he and Overmar "looked at several different possible concepts but thought digital toy apps for kids had the most potential. We presented our plan, did research for a few months, and then got funding from Bonnier to pursue it as a project." As their idea for digital toy apps developed, it became its own company (while remaining a subsidiary). Even for Bonnier, this was an unconventional beginning. "Bonnier employees can always pitch new ideas," Jeffery explains, "but I think it is safe to say that our story is an unusual one. Bonnier tends to grow through acquisition, but Toca Boca was developed 100% internally."

As the company began to grow, there were certain characteristics Ovemar and Jeffery wanted it to have. For starters, the pair wanted a company name that was easy to pronounce, fun to say, and easy to spell. They eventually settled on Toca Boca—a derivative of *toca la boca,* which is Spanish for *touch the mouth.* They also decided right out of the gate that their logo would be "a face with a big mouth"—and that every app they built would include an intro that played with the logo in one way or another. They also wanted to retain the focus on digital toys.

## Digital Toys

Although Toca Boca may look like an app and game developer to any outsider, Ovemar and Jeffery view it more like a company which specializes in making toys that happen to be digital. While it is easy to for some to confuse "digital toys" and "games," Jeffery feels that they differ in three distinct ways: "First, what makes them toys (as opposed to games) is that



# Toca Boca







The purpose of *Helicopter Taxi* is to extend the play beyond the device itself. This is best achieved by specifying the places in the room where the pilots Skip and Rita can land to pick up or drop off customers.




## HELICOPTER TAXI

you can't win or lose—the focus is on play. Second, there are no in-app purchases or third-party advertising in the digital toy apps. And finally, the interaction of our apps is thoroughly tested with kids throughout the development cycle. That's why they resonate so well with kids of all ages." So in each of Toca Boca's products you'll see a distinct, kid-centric visual design style. You'll also note that their products are explicitly unisex in both concept and execution. "We actively take a stand away from stereotypes and gender roles," says Jeffery. "Everything doesn't have to be pink princesses and superheroes."

Additionally, Toca Boca adheres to six guidelines "to make sure all our products are as good as they can be." As stated on the company's website, these guidelines are:

- Balance the different needs that kids have.
- We think it is important to play. But not just games
- We create products that allow you and your kids to play together.
- Our digital toys offer a positive view on technology.
- We are committed to providing a safe digital environment for your kids.
- You will like our products, but your kids will love them.

According to Jeffery, these guidelines "represent our values and what we think is important." Given that the founding team was comprised of people with professional and academic backgrounds in developing products for children, they decided that "being upfront and clear about what we believe in is a good start."

This rooted, value-based approach to development is helping Toca Boca combat the rampant technophobia that tends to arise whenever people discuss the impact of technology on children. "There are numerous articles about how terrible it is that kids are playing with iPads," Jeffery says, "when they could be playing outside instead! What [those arti-

# TOCA HAIR SALON



*Toca Hair Salon* is a digital toy meant to elicit creative play. Our goal with this app was to create an experience as close to cutting real hair as possible. Many other hair apps either have preset hair-dos to choose from or treat hair as one flat surface to cut as if it were a piece of paper. We all know that hair doesn't work that way. So does your child. Therefore our engineers and designers did their best to create a full set of realistic hair on characters that feel alive!








# Toca Boca

cles] fail to address is that it is not a matter of one or the other—the two aren't mutually exclusive in any way." There a multiple activities for which a person can use technology, and the impact those activities can have on a child's development can vary widely. For its part, Toca Boca endeavors to show that "there is both fun and learning that can be found" with new technology.

## Building the Business

As a company that designs products for children, Toca Boca has to deal with a longstanding challenge: designing and building a product parents will want to buy and children will want to play. "This is arguably the most challenging thing about the business," says Jeffery. As part of that effort, Toca Boca stays in contact with parents through social media in order to nurture a fan-base that is willing to recommend their apps to friends. "The best marketing we can get is a recommendation," says Jeffery, "so building a great brand with great products is a simple investment to make from a marketing perspective."

The company also benefits from having offices in Stockholm and San Francisco. "Different perspectives are always worth a lot," says Jeffery. What's more, the two-office approach has proved to provide an effective division of labor. "The Swedish team has the studio and the creative part of the company, while the American team does most of the marketing and sales."

## Looking Toward the Future

Jeffery acknowledges that making apps for children is a never-ending learning experience. "Making prod-



## TOCA TEA PARTY










*Toca Tea Party* is all about playing together! We really put the concept of multi-touch to a test when turning the screen into a table and then inviting three guests to join the party. It turned out to be one of our most intuitive and open-ended toys.

Domestic role-play is an important part of young children's everyday life. They imitate adults around them to explore and learn to understand different situations and tasks. The procedure of a tea party is a situation that children love to act out over and over again. And even though spilling is included, *Toca Tea Party* is the least messy tea party play set you can imagine!

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# Toca Boca



ucts for kids is a very humbling experience," says Jeffery. "You rarely can know ahead of time what will work or not." You can guess all you want—do your best to imagine what kids might like, but in the end "even as a professional, you're not a kid."

In spite of that humbling reality, Jeffery looks towards the future with an unwavering vision: to "invent a positive children's culture on and beyond the screen." However, there are no plans for Toca Boca to blindly rush into developing their intellectual properties in other media—in spite of the fact that, as a subsidiary of a multinational media corporation, they are immersed in an environment that strives to produce as much media across as many platforms as possible. "Toca Boca is a brand that could do very well in other areas too," Jeffery acknowledges. However, the company's main concern for now is on making sure that any transmedia development would be "something that our fans want."

Says Jeffery: "There is a Toca Boca take on a lot of things, and we'd like to explore what that could be." In the meantime, Toca Boca will remain focused on making children's apps that are "equally fun and magical." ❄

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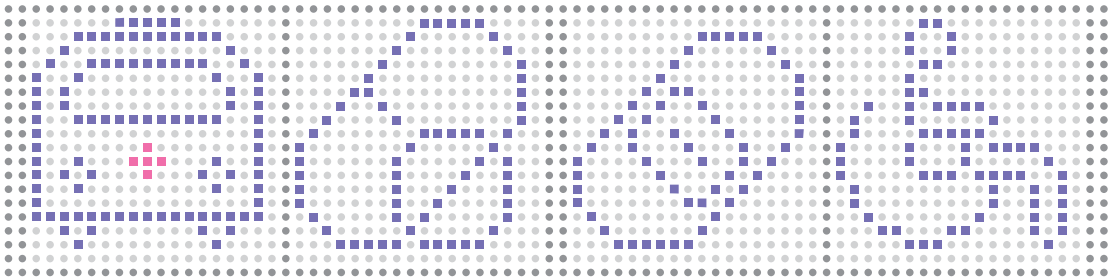
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# Health Care Games

## Help and Awareness for Those Suffering from Disease

**"It's precisely because games are simultaneously fun and purposeful that they make such an ideal mechanism to get people engaged with improving their health."**

**Due to the technological constraints and marketing** demographics faced by the early video game industry, the vast majority of games typically have had an action/adventure sensibility in their narratives. Beyond games aimed at a predominantly male audience, puzzle games aimed at children have been popular. However, as the gaming industry has expanded to include consumers from all walks of life, and as people with vastly differing experiences have begun to make games, video games are breaking new ground by addressing a variety of real-world medical issues.



Three games that are providing players a means to better understand illnesses are *Biogames,* LiteSprite's *SinaSprite,* and the upcoming adventure game, *That Dragon, Cancer.* While these titles only represent a fraction of the number of games addressing real-world health concerns, they do provide a glimpse into the motivations of those who make these games and signify how the industry is raising awareness about certain diseases.

### *BioGames*—Crowdsourced Diagnoses

Professor Aydogan Ozcan received his Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering from Stanford University in 2005. Now at UCLA, Ozcan has founded the Ozcan Research Group. Dr. Ozcan states, "The Ozcan Research Group is the name of my lab at UCLA School of Engineering, which aims to use photonics technologies to create better imaging, sensing and diagnostic tools." The Ozcan Research Group allows Ozcan to work with undergraduates, graduate students, and postdocs to create new technologies—one of which is *BioGames.*

The mission statement of the Ozcan Research Group is to develop and push "telemedicine technologies toward next generation smart global health systems," and the development of *BioGames* fits the group's goals. Consisting of an interdisciplinary team of electrical engineers, mechanical engineers, bioengineers, computer scientists, chemists, and physicists, the Ozcan Research Group developed *BioGames* and all of its features from scratch.

Simply stated, *BioGames* is a crowdsourcing system that uses games allowing people to diagnose illnesses. For example, the Ozcan Research Group has developed *MOLT,* a game in which players are tasked to diagnose and remove malaria-infected cells. As such, Ozcan feels that the "general classification for *BioGames* falls under 'serious games' as




# BioGames

Simply stated, *BioGames* is a crowdsourcing system that uses games allowing people to diagnose illnesses.



**OZCAN RESEARCH GROUP** Professor Aydogan Ozcan



The Ozcan Research Group, lead by Professor Aydogan Ozcan, is made up of an interdisciplinary team of electrical engineers, mechanical engineers, bioengineers, computer scientists, chemists, and physicists.

**MISSION STATEMENT:** To develop and push telemedicine technologies toward next generation smart global health systems.

it has an important goal." He goes on to point out that it can be considered a serious game because "it can be played by a group of experts for them to collectively get better in their overall diagnoses."

Though *BioGames* has only been around for a short period of time, it has already produced promising data. For instance, the homepage for *BioGames* states that "using non-professional gamers we report diagnosis of malaria infected red-blood-cells with an accuracy that is within 1.25% of the diagnostic decisions made by a trained professional." In other words, the game has proven its ability to educate and train people to identify infected cells. However, to offset concerns that might arise from using a crowdsourcing platform when the majority of those players may have no medical background, Ozcan shares his belief that healthcare professionals who have been trained to diagnose various medical conditions could be enticed to join the *BioGames* gamer community using monetary incentives—thus turning the gaming platform into "a smart telemedicine backbone" that makes remote diagnosis possible. This approach would allow highly-trained professionals to crowdsource "conflicting diagnosis decisions among medical personnel."

Clearly, Ozcan's vision extends far beyond the diagnosis of malaria. "The idea behind *BioGames* is to use crowds to get collectively better in pathologic analysis of microscopic images, which could be applicable to various telemedicine problems." Ozcan mentions, for example, the notion of using crowdsourcing to assist in pathology and biomedical testing. As the *BioGames* platform further develops, it might also be used to enable a patient to get "a second opinion" from perhaps hundreds of medically-trained specialists.

### *Litesprite*—Bringing Light to the World of Mental Health

People are becoming increasingly aware that mental health is a significant component of one's overall health. One company that is exploring how gaming

**One company that is exploring how gaming can help people manage anxiety, depression, and other conditions is Litesprite, which has developed a game called *SinaSprite* as a self-help tool for mental health management.**

can help people manage anxiety, depression, and other conditions is Litesprite, the developer of a game called *SinaSprite,* a self-help tool for mental health management that will be available for Apple and Android devices.

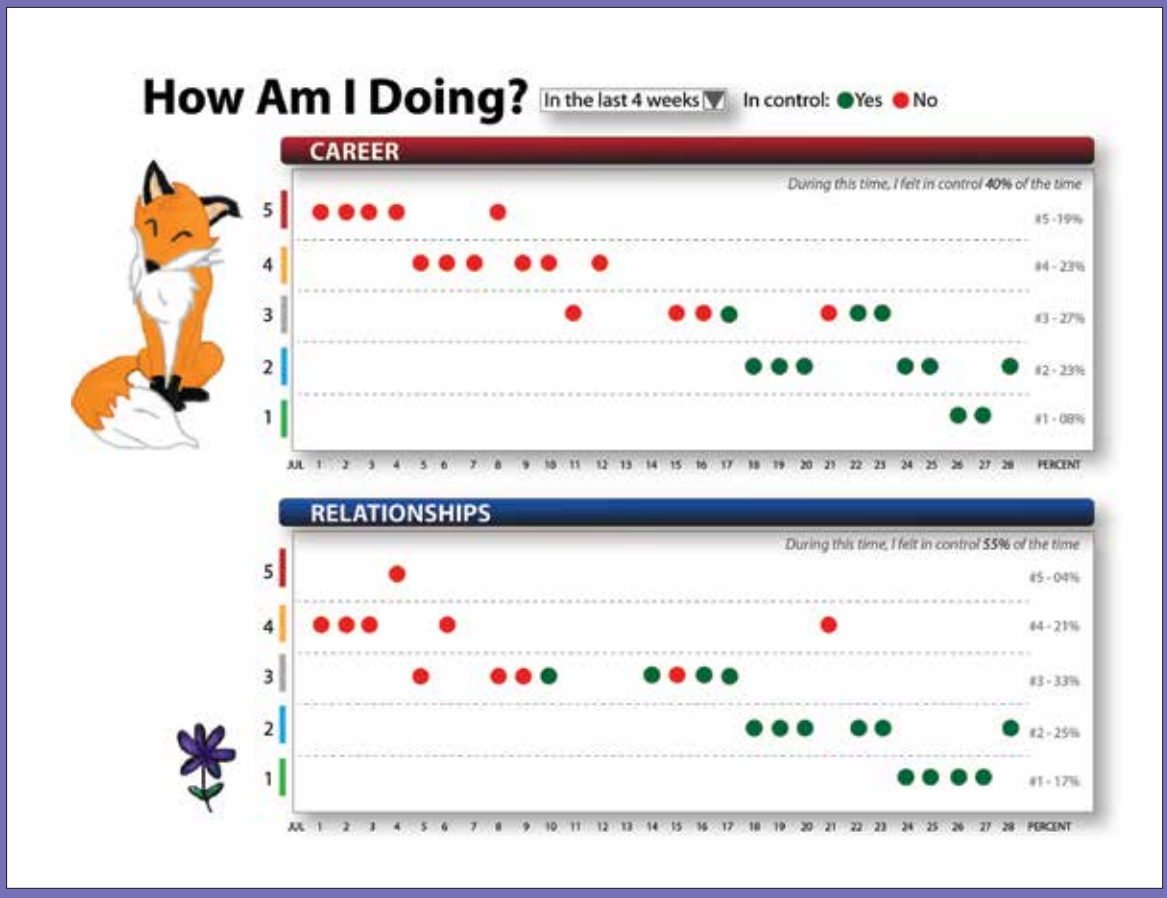
Interestingly, Litesprite CEO, Swatee Surve, doesn't come from a gaming background. "My main experience was developing and launching disruptive businesses in healthcare, mobile, fitness, and media," she says. The idea to develop a game that focused on mental health came from doing research on underserved areas of the medical industry. When she learned that a game might provide a compelling alternative to anxiety or depression, she knew she had the opportunity to meet an underserved need. Although Litesprite's primary target for this game is adult women with anxiety or depression, *SinaSprite* can help people with a wide variety of backgrounds and mental struggles, including PTSD.

In the game, players help Socks the Fox, a digital guide/pet, become a Zen Master. To do this, users catalog their daily concerns and, as one synopsis states, "'hold" their concerns while also engaging in other activities, or mini-games." Additionally, as one description for the game states, "evidence-based treatment methods are embedded into the gameplay so players learn healthy habits while simultaneously achieving the desired behavior change." As players uses the game to take note of their stresses and other emotional difficulties, the data can also provide insight to the professionals who work with these players.

Because mental health problems tend to be sensitive and private, Litesprite is working with clini-

# SinaSprite

developed by
**LITESPRITE**




Players help Socks the Fox, a digital guide/pet, become a Zen Master.

cians who have experience with evidence-based treatment methods, including faculty at the University of Washington School of Medicine, the Center for Comprehensive Services, and clinicians who have worked at Neurorestorative (a leading provider of rehabilitation help for people with brain and spinal injuries). This relationship with people in the medical field also highlights just how important gaming can be to those suffering from mental health problems. According to Surve, "it's precisely because games are simultaneously fun and purposeful that they make such an ideal mechanism to get people engaged with improving their health." Moreover, "there have been as many as 38 randomized control trials that have shown games can improve health outcomes in a range of conditions, including anxiety and depression."

Overall, Litesprite's game is doing quite well. In a challenge created by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for games to generate data; *SinaSprite* won second place (and $50,000). Beyond just achieving commercial success, Surve's long-term goal for Litesprite is to "create a suite of games that target different conditions and audiences."

### *That Dragon, Cancer*—A Medium for Empathy

One of the most ambitious games to address an illness is *That Dragon, Cancer.* Currently being developed by Ryan Green and Josh Larson as a console game for OUYA, *That Dragon, Cancer* is an adventure game retelling the story of a family dealing with a child diagnosed with cancer. Specifically, the game's narrative is based on the experiences of Green and his wife whose small son continues to fight terminal cancer. According to the game's homepage, it is designed to have "players relive memories, share heartache, and discover the overwhelming hope that can be found in the face of death."

Prior to working on *That Dragon, Cancer,* Green spent 10 years designing patient care software for a dialysis provider. His work eventually took him to Soma Games where he helped ship *Bok Choy Boy* and *Wind Up Robots.* In addition to his experience with Soma Games, he also made a few games for children that he released on the iOS. As for Larson, he started out as an artist and designer on *Treefort Wars*—an IGF Student Finalist in 2004. He then went on to co-found 8monkey Labs where he worked as an environment artist, level designer, and Marmoset Engine lighting pipeline designer for *Darkest of Days.* When he had a spare moment, Larson also "prototyped interactive scenes inspired by visions I would get during church worship." This work became *Weiv,* which Larson describes as "a software platform that adds collaborative and interactive video game visuals to worship and live music events."

## That Dragon, Cancer

Players relive memories, share heartache, and discover the overwhelming hope that can be found in the face of death.







JOSH LARSON



RYAN GREEN



The game's narrative is based on the experiences of Green and his wife whose small son continues to fight terminal cancer.

**Given that games are typically still seen as a medium designed for amusement, cancer may seem like an issue that is too important for the medium.**

Larson also organized game jams in the Midwest. At one such event—the Meaningful Gameplay Game Jam—Larson met Green. The pair began collaborating soon after and got a contract to team up on a mobile augmented reality app. When Green's third child, Joel, was diagnosed with cancer, he felt moved to "connect with others in a deep and meaningful way." "None of us are guaranteed tomorrow in this world," he explains, "and so if I can personally and professionally create space for myself and others to engage in experiences that invoke conversation about some of the hard things in life, and the beautiful things in life, and cause us to see each other as souls to be loved, then I want to do that." Larson was glad to support his friend in the effort, but as fate would have it, Larson soon encountered challenges of his own. "Thankfully," he says, "it was not nearly as severe, but now it's personal for me, too. In fact, when I was sitting in the waiting room a couple months ago, I was struck by seeing the same chair that's in our demo. His chair is now our chair."

To further develop the game's narrative, Larson and Green plan to get input from the nurses and doctors who have cared for Joel in order to better communicate to players how medical professionals deal with cancer patients. Additionally, Green says many of their current experiments with gameplay mechanics revolve around the often helpless feelings associated with fighting chronic or terminal illness, "What happens when our best efforts fail to 'win'; then what?"

Given that games are typically still seen as a medium designed for amusement, cancer may seem like an issue too important for the medium. Green sees some interesting parallels between game development and the challenge of dealing with a terminal illness. "Much like in video games, there are those moments of grace, those small power-ups, or glitches in the level that come to our rescue." Green goes on to say that "for me, a video game is the perfect form for the story that we'd like to tell, and unlike books or films, a video game allows us to invite the player to literally walk in our shoes for a moment and relive some of the darkest and some of the most beautiful moments in our life."

Larson explains their effort this way: "What we're creating is ultimately about hope instead of misery. I care about whether or not people can envision the victory of a boy outliving his several-weeks-to-live prognosis by over two years and counting. I care about people being able to look death in the face and declare that they're not afraid of it." Says Green: "Through this game we can encourage ourselves and others in our own small way to live a life free of the fear of death."

### Health Care and Gaming – Silent Pain, Digital Support

Suffering with a disease is often an isolating experience. Whether dealing with mental or physical illness, it is difficult for a patient to feel that others truly empathize with their struggles. Games like *That Dragon, Cancer* and *SinaSprite* are examples of how technology is alleviating the isolation many patients deal with. And as *Biogames* shows us, not only can health games help people better understand what patients go through, they can also create digital frameworks that allow a person to get help from medical professionals in brand new ways. ❄

THE Social Casino MMORPG

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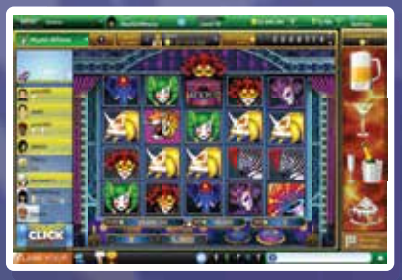


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**Culver City, CA**

# Just Another Job Interview

## A Short Work of Fiction… Perhaps




**And what's your name?**
*Ferdinand.*

**Full name?**
*Michaels. Ferdinand Michaels.*

**One moment.**

She keeps her eyes on me as she runs through the well-practiced motions of lifting the receiver and pressing the button I can only assume is somehow connected to Steve Kendall's phone. For all I know this is all a well-rehearsed show for my benefit only. Her eyes don't leave me as she speaks, as if suspicious I'll make off with all of the Jolly Ranchers in her crystal decanter.

The thought sticks with me: I did have a light breakfast.

**A Mr. Michaels is here to see you.... Mmmhmm.... I'll let him know.**

I'm beginning to feel self-conscious, now. I feel like I'm being scanned; her gaze hasn't left me since I walked in the door. I'm not used to so much attention.

**Mr. Michaels. Mr. Kendall will be with you in a moment. Please have a seat.**

Giant, cushy, colorful chairs line the lobby. They surround an over-large coffee table upon which lie a mass of dog-eared gaming magazines. Out of nervousness, I pick one up and thumb through it without reading a word. A vast wealth of images pops out at me, from any number of AAA console games that I have no desire to purchase or play.

I flop the magazine back onto the table and cross my legs. I begin to notice that the chair's comfort potential ends when the moment of sitting begins.

I wait. I look at my phone. I wait some more. I feel the stare of the office manager.

I pick up another magazine and flip through it. I see the same exact images I saw in the other one. The layouts are nearly identical though the order differs somewhat. I think I flipped past a few "retro" pages that discussed great titles from five years ago.

I feel old.

**Ferdinand?**

In surprise, I accidentally chuck the magazine out of my hands. It lands perfectly on the table, so I stand up and act like I did the whole thing on purpose. Mr. Smooth.




**Good to meet you. I'm Steve. We spoke on the phone.**

*Yeah, hi Steve. Good to meet you, too.*

**Let me give you a tour of the office. Give you an idea what things are like around here. First, and perhaps most importantly, is our arcade room. Some of our employees even host tournaments from time to time. Ping Pong, Foosball, and our MAME cabinet are all available anytime you want. As you can see, we even have a pinball machine.**

The room is deserted and the pinball machine has cobwebs.

*Anytime, you say?*

**Well, of course assuming you get your work done. We work hard and we play hard around here.**

We pass by the silent arcade room and into a larger space. Each of the walls is painted a different color.

**This bright and cheery room is where our biz-dev and marketing people work. Our production staff, where you'd sit, is over there in the corner. My office is just a few steps from there.**

We pass a door that says, in very stern lettering, **DO NOT ENTER.**

*Hey Steve, what's in here?*

Steve suddenly becomes very concerned. I feel that the interview process has taken a sudden turn for the worse.

**I'm not allowed to mention. Even with the NDA you signed, I can't discuss that project. It is the**




**topmost of top secret. I wish you hadn't mentioned it. I shouldn't have brought you so close.**

*Steve, really, it's not a big deal. I understand a company wanting to keep a few secrets.*

**No, you don't understand. This is the kind of project that, if it got out, we really would have to go after you. One of the previous applicants... well... I don't like to talk about it.**

Steve quickly looks to his right and left, noticeably turning a few shades paler.

**Let's move on. I'll show you our QA team.**

When I entered the building, I was on the first floor, and we have not ascended any stairs. So since this is a west-coast operation, I am surprised to find Steve leading me down a flight. Then another.

Then another.

Add one more to that list.

Steve pulls out a key that must have come off the set of *Harry Potter* and inserts it into a large metal door. The door is stripped of paint and dented in several places. It creaks loudly.

I see before me three-dozen glowing screens in front of as many tired-looking QA testers. I come from this world and my heart bleeds for them, but I can't do anything about it. As one of the testers in the back is carted off from exhaustion and exposure to free soda, Steve leads me out of the room.

**They're a top-notch team. They really dedicate themselves to their work. Last year we had a woman skip being the maid of honor at her sister's wedding so that we would miss our deadline by only six weeks.**

# 40 of the Top 50

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*Wow, she sounds dedicated. Where is she sitting?*
**Oh, we laid her off two months ago. Her contract was up and the CEO wanted to pare things back to core.**
*How has that worked out?*
**Well, THAT CEO was forced to quit after three months. Then a pair of co-presidents took over and moved our QA staff to India.**
*Then who are these people?*
**This is the new QA team. After the co-presidents were forced to quit, our current CEO worked out a deal with the local high school. We're bringing in dropouts to do our testing, now. They work cheaply and we get a fairly steady stream of them.**

We headed back up to Steve's office.

*So, Steve, where are the development and art departments?*
**We've got an artist and a programmer on site, but we hire the rest out on a project-by-project basis.**
*I thought you had mentioned you guys did your own in-house titles.*
**We do. Our marketing and biz dev teams tell us which game on the market is popular, and then we hire teams in India, Vietnam, Belarus, and Thailand to copy them.**
*Thailand?*
**Oh yes, they're just getting into the market. Terrific people.**

We slowed down near the production department.

*So, what would my job be?*
**Basically, you'd be in charge of working with all these overseas teams to deliver somewhere between six and 12 titles per year.**
*And what are the hours?*
**Oh, we like to keep it nine to five around here.**
*So, when does the production staff talk to the overseas teams?*
**Oh, most of us have frequent Skype calls somewhere between 8pm and 3am daily to ensure they stay up on their work.**
*Do you have core hours that you can keep instead of trying to get in by 8 or leave by 5 every day?*
**Oh, no. It's very important to our current CEO that we all work reasonable hours. It's one of the things that makes this place such a great place to work.**

I look over at a nearby cubicle. The nameplate identifies the individual as a Producer, and the poor woman is asleep at her desk, her hand ironically holding down the keyboard letter 'Z' which is stamping lines of digital snores across her latest report.

Before I can even ask myself what it is I might be getting myself into, I feel a small soft smack on the back of my head. I reach back and pop a suction dart off my bald pate and turn to look quizzically at Steve, who is aiming a Nerf gun between my eyes.

**Everybody gets one. Standard issue.**

He spins the gun around his trigger finger and slickly holsters it into his pocket.

I glance again at the dozing producer. Underneath a pile of books, papers, notes, beside a picture of her kids holding their hands up in the air as if waving goodbye, I see a Nerf gun still in its packaging.

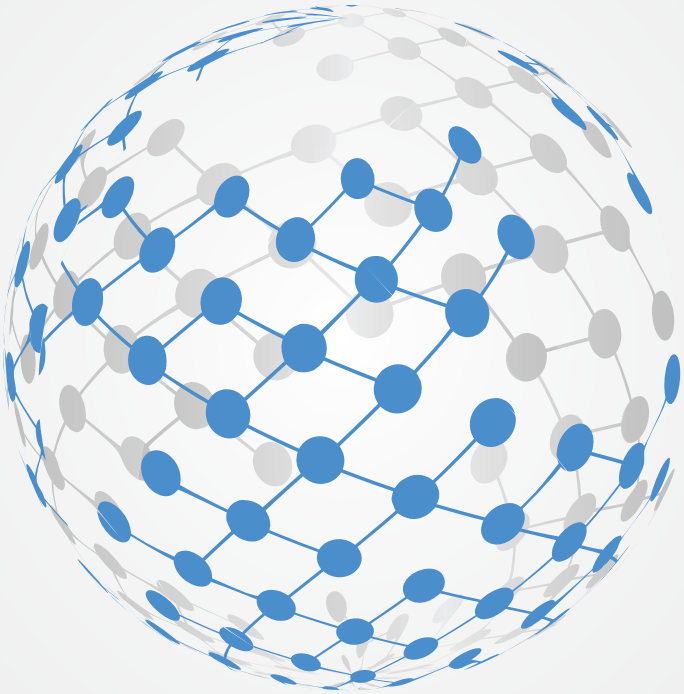
*Look, Steve, I'm not sure if this job's for me.*
**The job pays $65k and we'd want you to start on Monday.**
*Steve… this place is awful.*

His eyes start welling up.

**Please?** ❄



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# Social Casino–Phase II

## Going Beyond Loss Replacement

Today, social casino games are still the highest ARPU casual games on the market.

**The casual games business has seen its share** of hot trends come and go. Downloadable, free-trial games appeared to be invincible up until several years ago. Mobile was hot in 2004—then it wasn't—then it was again in 2011. Most recently, social casino games were making news for a string of high profile hits, followed by acquisitions and a flood of market entrants. Today, social casino games are still the highest ARPU casual games on the market, but the competition for customers has become extremely intense. Industry pundits like Dean Takahashi at GamesBeat feel like there's no more room in the space and that it's in decline overall.

Other social casino analysts, such as SuperData Research. estimate the genre will grow into a $4.4 billion market by 2015. Where will this growth come from? No doubt some form of innovation will be necessary to bring new customers into the genre, to convert more free players to paying players, and to bring back people who have tired of the same old grind of clicking a "SPIN" button all day.

### Social Casino–Phase II

Almost every social casino game in the space operates on the business model of "loss replacement." While all players go into a casino-style game with the hope of winning, eventually they learn the truth: that what they are getting is a pay-for-time-on-machine experience. That experience is characterized by an ever-decreasing coin balance. To stay in the game, you have to pay so that you can lose more.

FlowPlay is collaborating with companies such as Joju Games to build what we believe is the next evolution of social casino games—games which maintain the simple game-play mechanics that people like while providing pay-for-advantage tools that empower players to make their own luck. You might think of it as "paying to win." Players spend the same amount of money to play the game, but instead they experience an *increasing* coin balance as they play. This can be accomplished in many ways, but allow us to demonstrate how we're doing it in our games, *Fringo* and *Vegas World*.

### *Fringo*–A New Social Casino Game Mechanic

According to industry pundits, social casino players aren't interested in game innovation. They want to play slots or bingo. That is why almost all social casinos have exactly the same offering, and they are trying to compete with something else.

Back when downloadable PC games were the industry's main source of audience, designers created game mechanics based on the existing conventions of casual players within genres such as match-three, bubble popper, time management, and hidden object. When Facebook games became increasingly popular, a big portion of the audience didn't have the empirical knowledge that PC players had, and new conventions were made. Games like *FarmVille* and *Restaurant City* required the minimum interaction possible in order to appeal to these new gamers.

In *Fringo,* we are doing something similar. We created a game based on casino game mechanics and assumed players have never played a casual or social game before. By combining elements of gameplay that casino players are accustomed to, we created an innovative game that is very successful in the social casino space.

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*Fringo's* innovation is that it allows players to purchase power-ups to gain an in-game advantage. *Fringo* is a competitive hybrid of slots and bingo, with up to 100 players competing against each other. At the end of each round, players are ranked in order of the score they achieved during the round, and they are awarded virtual currency according to their ranking. Those in the top tier of the rankings receive a much higher payout than those in the mid-

**In the next evolution of social casino games, players spend the same amount of money to play the game, but instead they experience an *increasing* coin balance as they play.**

tier, and the lower rankings actually receive less currency than they used to enter the round.

Power-ups are available that give players an advantage by boosting their ranking in the results, ultimately increasing the amount of virtual currency they win at the end of the game. They are essentially paying for more coins just like the "loss replacement" model, yet the experience is much different. Players experience the increase in their coin balance as winning the game—not as losing coins and going back to the currency store to buy more.







### *Vegas World*–Pay for Better Odds

Vegas World differentiates itself in many ways from other social casino games, primarily since it's an MMO (massively multiplayer online) game—not simply a game to be played on Facebook. Another major difference is our "pay for luck" monetization. Throughout the game, players are offered the opportunity to purchase good luck Charms. As a player, you can buy them for yourself or purchase them for every player in the room you're in. For example, if you're sitting at a blackjack table, you can purchase a martini, and that martini will be given to every player in the room. Charms all have a limited lifespan depending on how much they cost. As you play, Charms increase the payouts of the game no matter what game you're playing—slots, blackjack, poker, video poker, bingo, etc. The odds of the game are adjusted on the fly for the life of the Charm.

What this creates for players is a sense that they are in control of the game, rather than being at its mercy. Instead of seeing their balances drop over time, they see them increasing as long as they have Charms. Once their Charms have become exhausted, they see their balances begin to drop again, so they have an incentive to purchase another Charm.

This mechanic requires a high level of game-balancing to work. The base payouts, bonus payouts and other mechanisms of the casino games must be finely tuned in order avoid inflation or a situation in which players continue to see their balances decline even though they continue to pay more. To accomplish this, we offer a vast array of Charms and a Charm rating system that recommends the appro-










priate Charm for each player's wagering level. As if that weren't complicated enough, consider that new players bet at a much lower level than more experienced players, with a large delta between high-spending VIP players and more casual players who spends only $20 or so a month.

Perhaps the biggest benefit to Charms is the fact that they allow players to interact with others in a completely new, but familiar way. Buying a round of drinks for a table of players is a familiar casino activity—but in real life you don't get better odds with your martini!

Of course, this Charm system wouldn't be as much benefit if it weren't running on top of a synchronous multiplayer game. Buying drinks for friends that may show up later asynchronously doesn't have the same impact as getting a "thanks for the drink" from a player in real-time. In *Vegas World,* most Charms are exchanged in public rooms like nightclubs and private rooms like hotel suites.

The concept of paying for luck isn't new to games—it's just new to casino-style games.

### The Outlook for Social Casino Games

The concept of paying for luck isn't new to games—it's just new to casino-style games. Many games, particularly MMORPGs, allow you to purchase items that give you an advantage. *Diablo III,* for example, has a wide variety of weapons. In addition to the weapons that are dropped, players can also purchase weapons in the marketplace. The better the stats of the weapon, the more likely the player will be able to defeat an opponent. In fact, many weapons have a statistic which influences the amount of currency loot dropped by mobs—a direct correlation to pay-for-luck.

Pay-for-luck is just one example of the sort of innovation that is possible within the social casino genre. Such games are in the midst of a tectonic shift from the days of simply clicking on a "SPIN" button all day. Innovation will happen through startups and other emerging players who will look to break the traditional mold with new ways to keep players engaged. You can bet that social casino games are here to stay. ❇

***Buying a round of drinks for a table of players is a familiar casino activity—but in real life you don't get better odds with your martini!***




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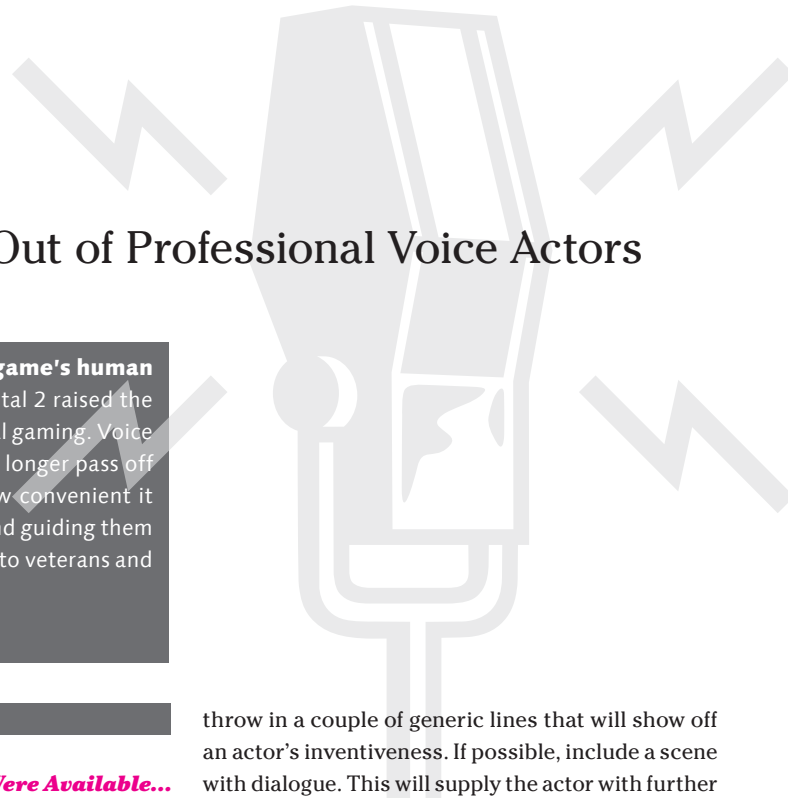
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# Say Goodbye to the Lead Programmer's Girlfriend

## Twelve Ways to Squeeze the Most Out of Professional Voice Actors



**The days of using the lead programmer's girlfriend to record a game's human** audio are waning. Games like last year's Walking Dead and 2011's Portal 2 raised the bar for sound design across platforms, establishing a new norm in casual gaming. Voice acting plays such a critical role in sound design that developers can no longer pass off mediocre voice acting as an acceptable transgression—no matter how convenient it may be to use the friend of a friend. Finding professional voice actors and guiding them through the world you and your team have created can prove daunting to veterans and newbies alike.

So here are 12 tips to take the dread out of the deed:

### THE AUDITION

**1** ***If Only Angelina Jolie Were Available...***

In your audition packet, offer your potential actors as many clues about your project as possible by including a backstory of the characters and the world they live in. Reference the pacing, style and intensity level of the game, and include a physical description of each character with a picture. To work around non-disclosure issues, developers often substitute the image of a celebrity to represent each character—but attaching a picture of Angelina Jolie as the prototype for your main female fighter will return bland *Lara Croft* impressions. A picture is worth 10,000 pixels to a voice actor—even a rough sketch will reward you with unique and relevant audition submissions.

**2** ***Take a Wild-line Rollercoaster Ride***

Choose the lines the actors will be reading so that they represent the widest range of emotions needed for the session, but also throw in a couple of generic lines that will show off an actor's inventiveness. If possible, include a scene with dialogue. This will supply the actor with further clues by showing how the character interacts with others, and it will allow you to hear how the actor deals with the difficult art of wild-lining (or having a conversation with no one). Actors must tap into their active imaginations to make the lines seem natural, so wild-lining separates the pros from the lead programmers' girlfriends.

### SESSION DAY

**3** ***More Preparation = Less Perspiration***

Be prepared! Have a clean script ready to go. Check your phone patches, your mic setup and levels. Confirm everyone is on the same page regarding times and process. Being prepared will relax you and help ease the energy in the room, allowing the session to be as creative and productive as possible.

### 4 *Rolling!*

You don't have to be an actor to get caught up in the energy of a session. When you react to the performance in the booth with positive reinforcement—nodding, making eye contact—trust abounds. The room is immediately electrified and the creative sparks fly! Nick Thomas, CEO of SomaTone Interactive, will often read the cut scene dialogue along with the actor rather than recording it wild-lined. This creates an instant connection while allowing him to control the pacing and intensity of the performance organically.

### 5 *Be Decisive...*

Generally what will happen in a gaming session is the actor will run down the script, reading two takes for each line. The director will then decide which take he/she prefers, and the engineer will note which take to keep. Momentum is paramount to this process; there are usually a lot of lines to get through (and time is money). It is important to be decisive and commit to your decision.

### 6 *...But Be Flexible*

Picasso once said, "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction." It is surreal to watch as the vision you've fostered comes out of the mouth of someone else, colored with his or her perspective and interpretation. Allowing the actors to experiment and deviate from your preconceived vision enables them to take your characters to interesting places you may have never imagined without them. Being flexible will allow the creative process to work to your advantage.

### 7 *Meet Walter from Shipping*

I once arrived for a session at a major gaming house only to be brought into the booth, handed the script and promptly introduced to no fewer than twelve people squeezed in behind the engineer. It was a classic case of too many cooks in the kitchen. All momentum was lost as the group had lengthy discussions about which take to keep. I couldn't blame them. Watching a session is exciting, and it is every member of the team's right to have a say in the creation of the voice of the characters they have been working on, but try to limit the number of bodies physically in the booth. If necessary the session can be phone patched to a separate office with ideas texted live to the sound guys.

### 8 *Love Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry*

If something about the performance isn't jibing for you, this is your only chance to say something. So don't be afraid to speak up—unless you don't mind paying for a pickup session. On the other hand, if you have nothing to say, that's okay too! You hired a professional voice actor to make your job easier. If you think the performance is good, resist making something up just to say something. It will use up valuable time as the actor chases your curve ball with takes that will most likely get scratched.

### 9 *Let's Get Physical*

A voice actor's job is actually very physical, and they respond well to direction that speaks to that. Wes Gleason, sound director at Blindlight, understands the effectiveness of physical imagery. For example, in a recent session he directed an actor to trace an (imaginary) knife down his (imaginary) opponent's cheek. While exploring the intensity of that physicality the actor instinctively created a stronger sense of menace that had been missing from earlier takes.

### 10 *The Con Game: Continuity, Consistency, Conformity*

Keep a keen ear out for continuity. It's important over the series of sessions to make sure each character's voice stays consistent (it doesn't age or lose its accent). In addition, if the first actor of the day sounded as if he were on the battlefield, the actor in the next session must conform to that volume and energy in the same scene.

## Marketing

### 11 *Ezio and Sonic Are the Same Guy? No Way*

Though an actor's IMDB ranking or his number of Twitter followers should never trump a better performance, an often overlooked tool developers can use is the newfound interest in voice actors thanks to social media. Players are curious and are engaging with actors all over the Internet. By reaching out to the voice actor once your game is released, you create a unique alliance within the social media matrix.

## When in Doubt

### 12 *You Don't Have to Go it Alone*

If this still seems daunting and you are fraught with panic attacks at the notion of having to deal with the alien entities actors seem to be, you always have the option of turning to an audio service provider like Blindlight or SomaTone, who have developed skills and relationships with actors during years of session experience. Collaborating with an experienced partner can provide value beyond budget and will ease your anxiety. ❊

by Lea Gulino;
*Voice Actor;*
**Sausalito, CA**

## SOME NOTES ON CASTING

**PAY-FOR-PLAY WEBSITES**
Voices.com, Voice123 and other pay-for-play sites are generally user-friendly, but the caliber of auditions you receive cannot be guaranteed.

**BREAKDOWN SERVICES**
When you post a casting notice via Breakdown Services to reputable talent agencies, the weeding out process has been done for you, making your job easier by narrowing down your options to a manageable level and offering quality across the board.

**SAGAftra**
To further focus your search you can turn to the unions for proven talent and most likely a larger amount of session experience. SAGAftra has responded to the burgeoning market by creating a multifaceted department dedicated to new media.

# Let's Knock Down the Communication Barrier

## The Case for More Voice Controls and Communication in Casual Games



Jonathon Myers looking at the game and playing via his voice

**The term "casual** gaming" doesn't quite mean the same thing it used to. A much broader audience Is now playing games, and it certainly isn't restricted to any one group of people. Even self-proclaimed "hardcore gamers" have come around to casual games, removing much of the stigma that once portrayed the market as only for young children or flash websites.

As the target audience has expanded for casual gaming, so has the appeal to larger developers and publishers. Considering that mobile and casual games are becoming increasingly more like our AAA PC and console games, we are likely to see higher demand for the peripherals we use every day on our other gaming systems. Phone-caddy Bluetooth controllers are already a hot seller, and devices like the Nvidia Shield and Ouya are making casual gaming easier than ever. So why are voice and communication—among the most intriguing, and certainly the most interactive of all AAA game features—being ignored in the casual and mobile markets?

### Prime Conditions

Several factors have combined to enable casual games to adapt some of the features and functionality of their AAA big brothers:

- ***The types of games in the casual genre have transformed over the years, offering more enhanced and fulfilling game-play.*** This is due in part to the fact that better-funded developers are making casual games, but it has also been heavily influenced by more powerful mobile devices making their way into the hands of consumers. The increase in device capability has allowed developers to create games with fewer restrictions, bringing AAA quality to tablet – and smartphone-based games. Quality games have helped bridge the gap between the "hardcore" gamers and the casual gamers.
- ***The audience that plays console and PC games is getting older and has less time.*** Those who grew up playing video games in the

'80s and early '90s have become adults who love games. Some of them still have time to devote to PC and console gaming; however, many now have families and jobs that take up most of their time. Between parental duties and keeping on top of their work, many players are lucky to get a 15 – or 30-minute break of uninterrupted time to game. A low-priced casual game sometimes is a better investment, especially when interruptions can occur anytime.

- ***Meanwhile, the market is growing.*** The Casual Games Association predicts the social games market will hit $8.64 billion by 2014. Strategy consultants Roland Berger predict online casual games will generate $46 billion by 2016. There are several trends feeding this growth. Mobile devices capable of gaming are significantly cheaper than they were a decade ago, and it would be considered strange to not own one by societal standards. The lower cost of mobile games appeals to many gamers, especially those who may not have time to enjoy the 20+ hour storyline of a $60 game. Combining these with the simplicity that casual games offer, and you have a recipe for success in a competitive market.

- ***Our current technology certainly is capable of delivering.*** Faster mobile broadband and more Wi-Fi locations around the world make connection less of a worry. For years Bluetooth headsets have provided us with the ability to communicate wirelessly with others. Using a Bluetooth earpiece for gaming would likely be acceptable by most gamers' standards.

## The Case for Voice Communications

Voice and communication add an incredible amount of depth to a game and its experience. Imagine competitive team-shooters like *Battlefield* or *Counter-Strike* without voice chat. They would have struggled to build the following and community that surround them without it. Many games rely on voice for teamwork, and would simply not work well without it. Communication is so important that when PC games lack support for it, gamers tend to find other ways to communicate. Most times this means using software like Teamspeak, Ventrilo, Mumble, or GameVox that give players the ability to communicate inside or outside of games and are popular among professional or dedicated gamers.

Communicating with teammates isn't the only benefit to adding voice into a casual game. Voice can also be a game mechanic on its own. Reactive Studios has done just that. Its iOS game *Codename Cygnus* is a spy thriller in which you use your speech to play a role. This is a new style of game that Jonathon Myers, CEO and Creative Director of Reactive, wants to promote as "interactive radio drama." The game is filled with stunning music and fantastic voice-acting, including renowned voice actors Logan Cunningham (the iconic narrator in *Bastion*), and Rob Wiethoff (who voiced hero John Marston in *Red Dead Redemption*).

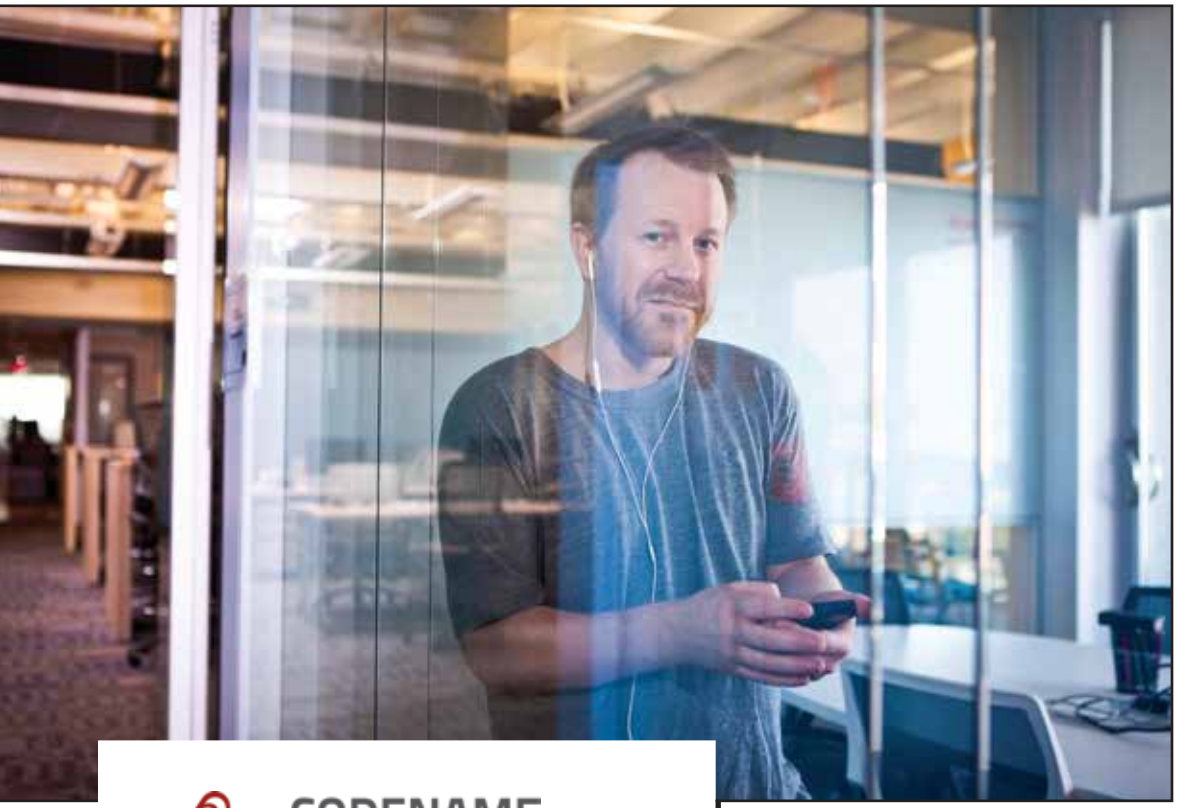
"I think the sky's the limit" says Myers, when asked how speech recognition and voice commands could be used in casual games. "A key element of casual and mobile gaming is the simplicity of user input. Rather than a complex controller, the player

**Why is voice and communication—among the most intriguing, and certainly the most interactive of all AAA game features—being ignored in the casual and mobile markets?**

by Jordan Davis; *Blogger & Social Media Consultant, Crawford Communications;* **Visalia, CA**



Recording session with voice actor for *Codename Cygnus, Bastion* Jennifer Bean in the self-constructed sound booth of Reactive Studios.



Casual games are appealing to a greater market, but to really succeed they should take advantage of one of our most basic human instincts: the need to communicate.

Jonathon Myers (creative director, Reactive Studios) at the Reactive Studios co-working space Workbar Cambridge.

CODENAME CYGNUS

uses a touch interface. This provides a more intimate and visceral connection to the game and opens up the possibility space for design. To follow on that, since all mobile devices also accept microphone input (they began as phones in the first place!) the human voice can become a source of user input for controlling or managing the game-play experience. That's exciting to me, and it was a starting point for *Codename Cygnus*."

He adds this important note: "It used to be that mobile games only received attention and write-ups on certain sites, but now we are seeing mobile game interest and coverage on all sites. I think doing new and innovative stuff is very important in order to capture the attention of gamers who want high quality experiences."

The Emergence of Voice-controlled Casual Games

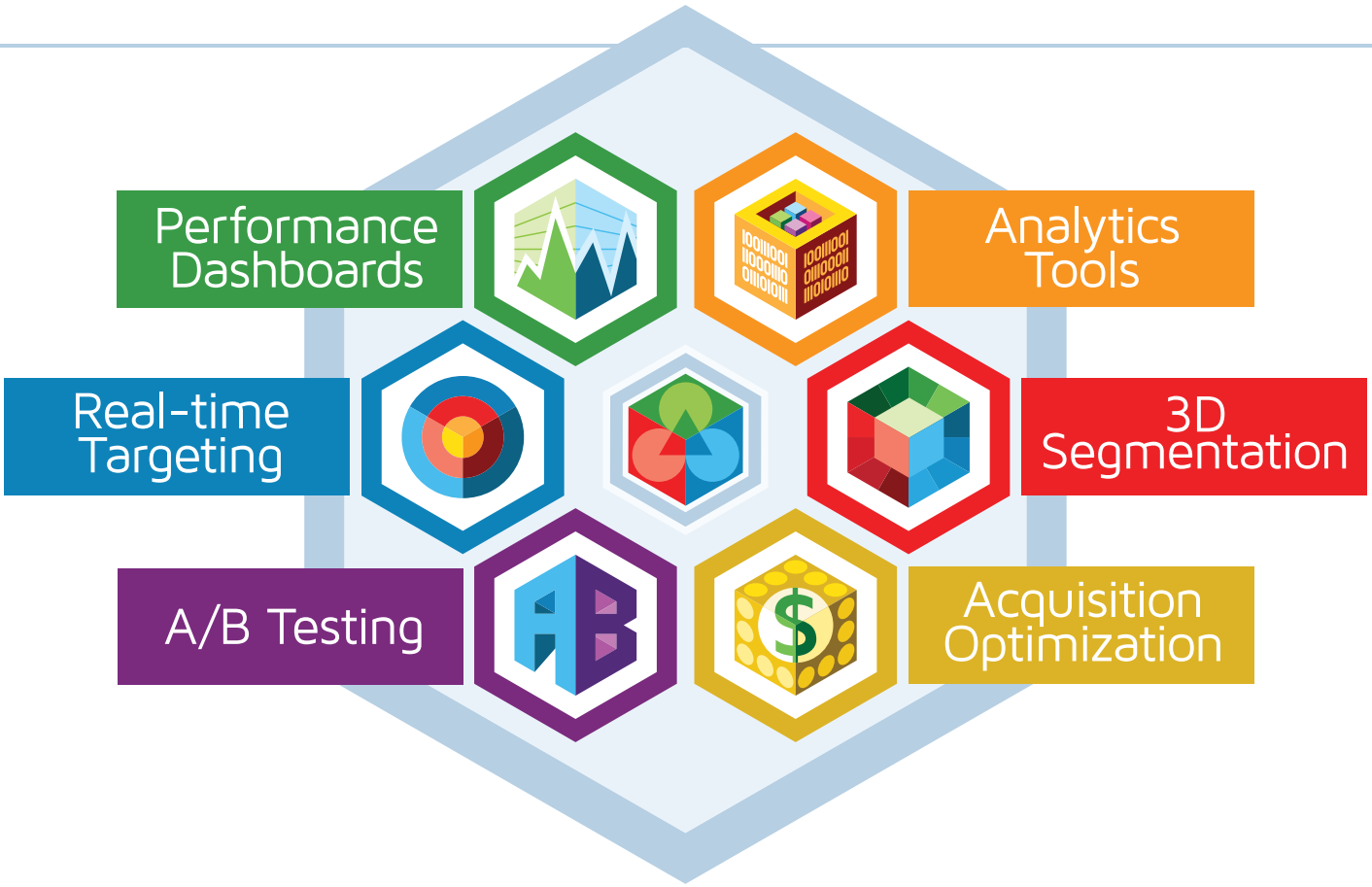
We are already starting to see console and PC games integrate voice (*Mass Effect 3* is one example). It is safe to assume we will start seeing more voice-controlled games, especially with the arrival of the Xbox One, which comes with the Kinect peripheral.

Even existing games can be improved by adding speech recognition and voice commands. By adding speech functionality to pre-existing actions, you add options for those who might have trouble with the existing controls. These options lead to a larger player-base. Myers says, "Giving vocal commands or communicating with others was a natural and established form of interactivity before it became digital. If designed well, voice input is extremely intuitive and there is less learning curve to speak and communicate."

No doubt there will be challenges when designing games with voice control or speech recognition. Microphones must be free of background noise that could compromise speech recognition components. Traffic noise, construction, and even other voices could be a barrier to a solid game-play experience. Headsets that support ambient noise suppression are almost a necessity for uninterrupted game-play, but there is certainly no shortage of them available. For example, the Voyager line of Bluetooth headsets from Plantronics combines a unique noise-cancelling microphone with wind-reduction technology to remove any distracting noises.

Voice is an amazing tool to improve games in both their operation and their community. It adds more functionality and shorter learning curves to expand the player base and community. Casual games are appealing to a greater market, but to really succeed they should take advantage of one of our most basic human instincts: the need to communicate. ❊

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by Elaine Heney;
*CEO, Chocolate Lab Apps;*
**Dublin, Ireland**

# Go Back to Doing What You Love

## Four Ways a Virtual Assistant Can Help You Get Your Life Back

**As CEO of a small indie games company, I've** spent the last 14 months doing battle in the trenches. The list of tasks required to publish a game, especially across multiple platforms, can have a serious impact on your health. I love my job—but things were going a little crazy.

MY TO-DO LISTS WERE ENDLESS:

- ☐ Wire-frame new game concepts
- ☐ Create game art
- ☐ Develop games
- ☐ Write app descriptions
- ☐ Research killer keywords
- ☐ Register games with ad networks and in the stores
- ☐ Optimize ads to maximize revenue
- ☐ Create screenshots and icons
- ☐ Test pricing in paid apps and IAPS
- ☐ And TONS of other stuff as well

Suddenly making games wasn't as simple or as fast as I had thought. Behind the scenes there is a lot of admin work, tracking, registering games, creating ID numbers, uploading content, and app analysis that I needed to find the time to do. All of this was slowing me down. I didn't want to spend my days creating app IDs or resizing and uploading screenshots.

Then a few months ago I started to take notes of any repetitive work I was doing each day. And I came up with a plan. I decided to see if I could hire someone to take over a lot of this work for me. I wanted to get my life back, and free up my time to do what I love—designing and making awesome games.

I immediately started looking for someone with good admin experience, great English and a love of apps and technology. And since I travel a lot it, I realized it didn't matter where that person lived or worked so long as we could coordinate our interaction. So I took the plunge and hired a virtual assistant. And I'm so glad I did. Here are four reasons you should consider hiring a VA of your own.

### 1. SPEED UP GAME DEVELOPMENT

Making a game is one thing. Creating and entering all of the metadata is something else entirely. It is incredibly time consuming. There are many virtual assistants available who have excellent English and can write excellent app descriptions. My VA can actually write a better game description than I can! VAs can do keyword research and look at which sub-categories in the store would suit your game best.

If you are using ads in your games, your VA can register your new game with the ad companies you use. Then she can send you a word doc with all the IDs in one place—ready to integrate into your game. This will save you *so much* time.

Not only that, while you are developing your game, your VA can be setting everything up in ITC, Play or Amazon: name, category, price, description, release date, icon, screen shots—everything. All your VA needs to get started is your bundle ID. When your game is complete, the first time you log into ITC, your game is already at the "Waiting for upload" status. That's pretty awesome.

### 2. CONTROL THE QUALITY OF YOUR GAMES

When interviewing for a virtual assistant, make sure that each candidate owns a smartphone and tablet. You'll want to add your VA to your team in test flight and send builds out to them. If your VA lives overseas, often he can review your game while you sleep. The next morning, you will have the full spreadsheet report in your inbox. This will cover any technical

**All my screenshots were resized and uploaded as I slept! New Android Ad IDs were created for my games and sent to me via email.**

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issues, crashes, user difficulties and graphical problems encountered. Having a new pair of eyes look at your game is priceless. The VA can find bugs you wouldn't, and you can get these fixed before you launch your game, resulting in a stronger game at launch.

### 3. PORT EXISTING GAMES

I had a few cocos2d-x games I wanted to port to Play and Amazon. The problem was I didn't have the time to start copying over all of the descriptions to the new platforms. I didn't feel excited about resizing and uploading a ton of screenshots, and I was breaking out in a sweat when I thought of how many new advertising IDs I had to make. So I asked my VA to do all of this.

Starting from the content in ITC, my VA researched the requirements of the main Android stores. Then, using the existing metadata, the VA modified this content and registered all my games on the other stores. All my screenshots were resized and uploaded as I slept! New Android Ad IDs were created for my games and sent to me via email.

With very little work by me, all my cocos2d-x games were registered on multiple platforms, and I had a list of IDs ready to integrate. All it took was 30 minutes of my time to write out some instructions and email them to my VA. Absolute magic! Now I can use this found time to do something I really love—creating new games. This is a much better use of my time and means I can grow my business much faster.

### 4. MAINTAIN OLD GAMES

Once you've launched a game and see it live on the App Store, the real work starts. Think of all of the ways that a virtual assistant can help: A virtual assistant can:

- Track your game's performance in the store and come up with a plan to improve your users' experience and drive downloads and revenue.
- Track how all of your existing keywords are performing (using a program like Sensor Tower), identify those that are poorly ranked in search results, and plan new keywords.
- Using market research, look for similar types of apps to yours and identify if there would be another category which would suit your game better.
- Read through all of the reviews that customers have left for your game and create a prioritized list of feature updates to address in your next game update.
- Maintain a schedule for updating existing games and issue a weekly report on which games are due for an update the following week and what updates are required. For any metadata updates, your VA can update ITC directly with new keywords, descriptions, and category changes, and have the new build at "ready to upload" status.

You have now put your game updates on autopilot. All you need to do is complete the required bug fixes, and upload the updated game on the scheduled date.

**Your time is incredibly precious. In your business, you should use your time in the most productive ways possible. Hiring a full- or part-time person to help out with the boring, repetitive admin work is something that works really well for mobile games companies.**

### So What Are You Waiting For?

Your time is incredibly precious. In your business, you should use your time in the most productive ways possible. Hiring a full – or part-time person to help out with the boring, repetitive admin work is something that works really well for mobile games companies.

I'm happy to report that I no longer work in the trenches. Instead of working *in* my business, I work *on* my business. Not only that, I have freed up much of my time. Instead of being glued to my laptop, I have a life again! I can take holidays, meet friends, and detach myself from my business, knowing that it is still running without me being there all the time.

Hiring a VA was one of the best things I have done to drive growth in my business and get my work-life balance back in order. ❄



# Now We Are Talking

# Abbey Games and *Reus*



**Abbey Games was founded in 2012 by four students at Utrecht University: Adriaan Jansen, Bas "the Baws" Zalmstra, Maarten Wiedenhof, and Manuel Kerssemakers. Still located in Utrecht, Abbey has published the games *Tinytanic* and *Reus*. *Tinytanic*, a free-to-play game created in just 72 hours, requires the player to survive for as long as possible aboard a disaster-struck ship. Released May 16, 2013, *Reus* allows players to control giants that will shape the planet to their will while dealing with uncontrollable human populations.**

***Casual Connect* recently had the opportunity to interview Kerssemakers, Abbey's co-founder and programmer, about how it all got started...**

***Abbey Games was formed at Utrecht University. How did Abbey come together?***

It started with Bas and Adriaan discussing their dream of working in a game studio. Soon afterwards they recruited Maarten, and we actually started the company by giving ourselves a name and starting work in the basement of the University. There were (and still are) some difficulties balancing our studies with the large effort that running a business requires. The big benefit, however, is that we could use our student loans to support ourselves, so we did not have to have an income during *Reus* production.

***Lots of people dream of making video games and starting their own game studios. What steps did you and everyone else at Abbey Games take to make* Reus *a reality?***

So, as I said, we had an advantage by having our student loans. This meant we did not have to worry about investments. Let me mention a few things that were also important for us. We started to get professional really quickly. As academic students, we did not know how to do that, which meant asking a lot of ques-

















tions to all the smart and experienced people in our network. We took lots of advice, but the one piece of advice we didn't take was to work on a smaller project than *Reus*. We believed *Reus* had the potential to become very successful, so we just went ahead and did it.

The last important factor was to work with hard-working people. In the first few months we stopped working with some people because they just had different goals or levels of motivation for the project than we did. To be taken seriously by mentors and supporters, you have to constantly show people you're serious about what you do.

***What was the initial inspiration for* Reus*? Specifically, what came first—the game's mechanics, its visuals, or the overall story you wanted to tell?***

The overall story. The mechanics and the visuals, and everything else came from lots of iteration, lots of thinking and lots of hard work. The source of inspiration for *Reus* was very concrete: the music video for "Turn" by Amongst Giants.

***Given that* Reus *allows players to control giants that shape nature, did Abbey Games intend to layer environmental messages into the game?***

Our primary goal and love has always been to make great, entertaining games. That being said, we do appreciate a game's

# Abbey Games and *Reus*




context. *Reus,* and the video that inspired it, definitely gives some food for thought. The way humanity deals with nature is something that can be criticized, and if we spark some important thoughts in people's minds, we're glad for that. But we don't believe we can do that without first creating a game that can compete with other entertainment.

***The art style for* Reus *is incredibly distinct. How did the look of* Reus *come to be?***

The art was initially inspired by the same video that inspired the theme, partly because of its beauty, and partly because of its simplicity. However, after much iteration, we think we were able to develop something unique from there.

***To help broaden* Reus*' appeal to an international audience, Abbey Games has asked its fans to help with translating it into multiple languages. What has been the response to this innovative bit of crowdsourcing?***

This project is going great. People are putting in lots of effort and hard work, only because they want to give something to the community. For managing this project we use CrowdIn, which works fine.

Another thing we have learned is that a fan base is quite unpredictable. We know where we have fans and how much they play, but in advance it's unclear whether or not there are enough hardcore native speakers to help us. It's always a surprise when people volunteer their time.

***You made* Reus *DRM-free. What were some of the reasons for this?***

The main reason is what we heard from the customer. A large part of our (possible) audience has a strong opinion on DRM and we want to respect that. We chose to work with Good Old Games and Desura for this. Good Old Games' audience also fits the god game/Sim genre quite well, so we did not want to miss that.

Furthermore, we did not feel we could avoid piracy anyway, and we did not care all that much. Of course, it's hurtful when you hear of someone who plays your game a lot and does not want to support you for it, but in the end, as a starting studio, it's more important to reach a lot of people.

***Reus* was released in May of 2013. Though it hasn't been out long, what have you learned from the feedback you've received from fans so far?**

Oof... so much! We learned about many of the flaws in *Reus,* both in code and in game-play (most of which we've fixed through a series of patches). We also learned people were really delighted to finally see a god game again. We noticed some people enjoyed the game for its new ideas, and others expected a more traditional god game made up mainly of power-play.








It's also very important to get into the discussion about your game wherever it's appropriate. This helped form many positive opinions about our game and our studio. We've never seen such a nice audience as you find on the Steam forums.

***How did you approach marketing the game? Were there other marketing campaigns for indie games that you looked to for guidance?***

We knew nothing about this. We searched everywhere. It's hard to find concrete information on marketing a game, but there is a lot of more general advice on this topic. In hindsight, we think that simply working with distributors (and having a good game!) is the best marketing you can get.

However, we can't be sure, and the press we received has definitely helped spread the buzz. We started contacting press by looking up everyone who had covered the announcement of *Godus,* because, like us, Peter Molyneux also tried to revive the god game.

***Given that your formal education is in computer science, how do you feel you have transitioned into doing Public Relations for your studio? Is there anything you learned you wish someone had told you?***

We learned a lot from listening to other people. Especially to Rami Ismail from Vlambeer, and everyone at Ronimo Games and

# Abbey Games and *Reus*







Stolen Couch. These people had experience with their own marketing, and they helped us judge the quality of our videos.

I don't think that we could have learned more from listening. In the end it's more important to just put a lot of hard work (research) and time into forging relationships with the press and your fans.

***Currently, what are some long-term goals for* Reus*? Given that it is increasing in popularity, are there discussions about producing a sequel, media spin-offs (like a comic book), or some other type of merchandise?***

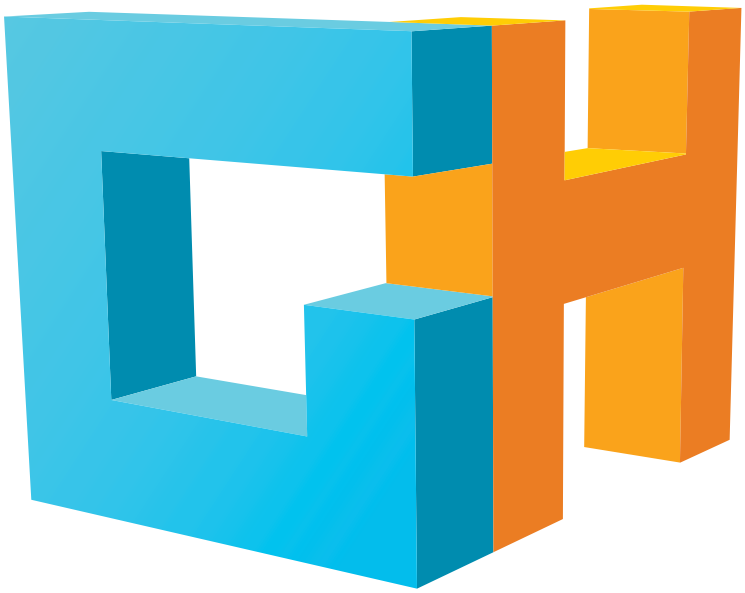
We recently released a patch with new game-play modes. This was one of the last big patches we are going to do. When we're patching in the translations, we'll also add some more content, but then we'll mostly keep to patching in some fixes once in a while.

As a games studio, we want to focus on creating cool new games, and we're starting work on a new project right now. Although we are interested in spin-offs and merchandise, we noticed that whatever side project we're doing always increases our development time.

Our main principle is to always keep working on games, so you probably won't see too many spin-offs. You can ask us about a sequel again in a few years.

***Final question: The business cards for Abbey Games were designed to also function as a card game. How did this idea come about?***

Maarten should get all the credit for this one. He came up with the idea. It cost him some time to make, but everyone's happy with the results. The game is too sparsely spread to actually be played a lot, but whoever receives one of the rare cards appreciates the idea and the reference. ❊



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